

# Orchestrated chaos: Crisis in East Timor

From the Editors in the [September 22, 1999](#) issue

The big bold type across the magazine's cover said "Slaughter in East Timor." But the issue was dated 1979, not 1999. *Inquiry*, a small-circulation (and now defunct) biweekly, was deploring the U.S. press's inattention to the atrocities taking place in the former Portuguese colony. Unfortunately, what has been happening in East Timor this month has been going on in varying degrees ever since Indonesia brutally invaded and annexed this small remote territory in 1975 shortly after Portugal abandoned it. Well before the recent rampage in which heavily armed irregular militias killed an estimated 7,000 people, destroyed much property and sent many thousands into hiding or exile, East Timor had lost almost a third of its populace—more than 200,000—to repressive Indonesian rule, either in massacres or by enforced starvation.

What some called "the hidden genocide" has become less hidden. Despite intense intimidation, 98.6 percent of the eligible East Timor voters went to the polls on August 30, and 78.5 percent of them cast ballots for independence in a United Nations-administered referendum. It was then that the anti-independence militias—aided and abetted by elements of the military—exact their revenge, systematically taking over the territory by means of terror. Ana Gomes, Portugal's ambassador to Indonesia, early on put the blame squarely on the Indonesian military: "It's not an uncontrolled violence. It is a . . . planned and orchestrated chaos by military forces. They want to scare the international community—the observers and the journalists—to get them out and massacre the East Timorese."

East Timor is the only predominantly Christian territory in the Indonesian archipelago, and Roman Catholic institutions seemed to be singled out for attack. A number of priests and nuns have been killed, and churches and convents torched. Bishop Carlos Belo, co-winner of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize, had to flee to Australia; his home was burned, and those who had taken refuge in it were taken away by militiamen. Nor have Protestants been spared; among the murdered was Francisco

de Vasconcelos, general secretary of the Christian Church of East Timor.

For several days the U.S. and other major powers were reluctant to act, saying that Indonesia should resolve the Timorese crisis on its own. That, said José Ramos-Horta, pro-independence activist and Bishop Belo's co-Nobel laureate, would be like asking Hitler to save the Jews or Saddam Hussein to save the Kurds. One reason for the go-slow approach: Indonesia, long a U.S. ally—and a recipient of much U.S. military assistance—controls sea lanes of strategic interest to the U.S. But eventually President Clinton took a harder line, threatening sanctions and calling for deployment of an international peacekeeping force. Indonesia's President B. J. Habibie at first was adamantly opposed to such a force, but faced with extraordinary international pressure (and fearing a loss of foreign aid), he finally conceded that the peacekeepers would be necessary. If outside intervention was justifiable in regard to Kosovo, it is even more justifiable in regard to East Timor. There is no issue of national sovereignty here; Indonesia occupied East Timor illegally and in violation of international law.

Australia will play the major role in the peacekeeping mission, with the U.S. supplying logistical and intelligence support. The mission is obviously needed on humanitarian grounds, but it would also give the U.S. and Australia an opportunity to do a bit of atoning for past inaction and wrong action. Both countries acquiesced in Indonesia's occupation of East Timor. In fact, President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger dined with dictator Suharto in Jakarta a couple of days before the unprovoked invasion. On that occasion Kissinger told reporters that "the United States understands Indonesia's position on the question" of Timor—which Suharto took to be a green light.