

## **A weapon more powerful than guns**

The international solidarity movement for East Timor: a weapon more powerful than guns

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For 23 years, the people of East Timor waged a bitter and at times lonely struggle against a mighty military dictatorship which enjoyed unstinting support from western governments who valued their economic ties – trade, investments and the sale of arms – to the exclusion of all else. The fact that Indonesia's invasion in December 1975 was condemned as unlawful by the United Nations from the very outset did not alter the reality that, whatever the formal, diplomatic position of governments around the world on the invasion, it was 'business as usual' for governments, multinational corporations and arms manufacturers.

Efforts to build international solidarity with East Timor were confronted by a powerful pro-Suharto lobby whose supporters closed their eyes to the emerging information of unprecedented brutality at various stages of the Indonesian occupation starting from the day of the invasion on 7 December 1975. By 1978, it was estimated that at least 200,000 people had died, nearly a third of the population, yet this counted for little to those pursuing diplomatic and commercial interests. It was against this brick wall that international solidarity was painstakingly built.

Another barrier came from people on the left who believed that the East Timorese should throw in their lot with the Indonesian people's fight for democracy, on the assumption that the fight for independence was a 'lost cause'. In Indonesia itself, the distortions disseminated by the regime and lack of information held back solidarity for many years.

There are several quite distinct phases in the international campaign to support the people of East Timor. During the first years of the occupation, at a time when Fretilin, the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, was still in control of much of the territory, there were many solidarity organisations in Europe and Australia which campaigned on the issue of independence for East Timor and support for Fretilin. This was particular true of the Campaign for an Independence East Timor in Australia led by the tireless Denis Freney, a deeply committed man who was able to maintain regular radio communication with the movement inside and to produce a constant flow of reports and newsletters which generated support around the world. The Australia East Timor Association also came into existence in 1975 and kept up relentless pressure on succeeding Australian governments. However, by 1979, Fretilin had suffered heavy defeat and for a time seemed to have all but disappeared. The flow of radio information had been halted in 1977 and solidarity groups were bereft of information. This was the bleakest period for East Timor internationally and, with the prospect of independence

seeming to be very remote, solidarity organisations focusing on independence fell by the wayside.

For the next few years, several Catholic groups and individuals in Australia played a critically important role by making contact with East Timorese who were stranded in Indonesia or who could be contacted in the territory; they succeeded in collating a wealth of information about the terrible sufferings of the East Timorese, so many of whom had by this time been corralled into strategic centres under tight military control. In this phase, the emphasis was on the human rights and humanitarian tragedy that unfolded and for several years, the onus was on human rights organisations like TAPOL to keep the issue of East Timor alive. In 1982, the Australian Senate conducted an inquiry into conditions in East Timor at which TAPOL was one of many who testified.

During this bleak period, the People's Permanent Tribunal held a tribunal in Lisbon in July 1981 before a panel of well-known jurists, at which the Fretilin central committee made an indictment against Indonesia for its unlawful occupation of East Timor and for the crime of genocide. The US government was also indicted for supporting the Indonesian aggression. It was at this time that the Portuguese solidarity organisation, the CDPM, was born and led for years by Luisa Pereira.

At another level, support was building for representations to be made at the UN's Decolonisation Committee whose agenda included East Timor despite intense lobbying by Jakarta. One of the first people to testify there as early as 1978 was Noam Chomsky, the political analyst and linguist who has retained an abiding interest in East Timor and the US role in supporting the invasion. Attendance by activists from all over the world on East Timor's behalf became a regular feature at the Committee's meetings throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Gradually too, the issue of East Timor was brought to the attention of members of the US Congress who, from as early as 1980, sent letters to the US Administration on a variety of issues, thanks to persistent lobbying by Arnie Kohen. In the UK, Lord Avebury who had raised his voice from the very start of the occupation, condemning the invasion, pushed for a debate in the House of Lords in December 1980 to condemn the Australian government for issuing an injunction against the weekly magazine, *New Statesman*, for publishing an article quoting the British ambassador's secret support for Indonesia over the invasion in 1975. The all-party Parliamentary Human Rights Group of which Eric Avebury was chair called repeatedly for an arms embargo against Indonesia because of its occupation of East Timor.

The Washington lobbying paid off when President Reagan's visit to Indonesia in early 1986 was plagued with negative media coverage, even leading to several well-known journalists being refused permission to enter Indonesia to cover the visit.

Throughout the whole period, Amnesty International made regular interventions and issued reports on the human rights situation. In 1983, the organisation published an official Indonesian torture document that had been smuggled out of Indonesia by the late Mgr Martinhu da Costa Lopez, following his removal as the bishop of Dili.

In the UK, support passed through several phases. In the early years, the BCIET, British Campaign for an Independent East Timor, spearheaded the movement, with TAPOL closely involved in that campaign but also conducting its own activities and information gathering. After 1979, BCIET became defunct and it was TAPOL which remained to keep the issue alive. In 1984, the British government concluded its first contract to sell Hawk aircraft to Indonesia. This led to a fruitful partnership with Campaign Against Arms Trade. During the early 1980s, church-based organisations took up the campaign with vigour, especially CIIR, the Catholic Institute for International Relations and CAFOD, Catholic Agency For Overseas Development. BCET, the British Campaign for East Timor drew together all these NGOs and a number of peace groups, and grew in strength especially after launching a campaign for support following the Santa Cruz Massacre in November 1991.

This was the phase of building an international solidarity network and strengthening support for East Timor among parliamentarians. From the early 1980s as contact with Falintil and its leader Xanana Gusmao was gradually re-established, solidarity organisations were formed in many European countries which held annual consultations, with each organisation taking turns to host the gathering. Now the issue was the need for peace talks under the aegis of the UN, and when the level of fighting grew intense, for a ceasefire, and exposing the consistent pattern of human rights violations. Although this was primarily a European network, the Free East Timor Japan Coalition also began to attend the meetings.

In November 1987, the international solidarity movement spread its wings to the whole of the Pacific with the holding of the first Asia-Pacific Consultation on East Timor or APCET, in Manila and later, solidarity groups held gatherings in ASEAN capitals, often in the face of police clampdowns. The ASEAN governments were under strong pressure from 'big brother' Indonesia to allow no space in their countries for gatherings to support East Timor.

In June 1988, a UK-Japanese parliamentarian mission visited Portugal for meetings with Portuguese MPs, which led to the establishment of Parliamentarians for East Timor which Lord Avebury chaired. PET undertook a number of international actions, including making representations to the UN Secretary-General about the fate of East Timor. The European Parliament adopted several resolutions throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In March 1989, a group of British MPs made a visit to East Timor. One member of the group was Ann Clwyd MP who, from this moment on, committed herself wholeheartedly to supporting East Timor.

In Canada, a solidarity group called East Timor Alert Network was set up in the late 1980s on the initiative of a photographer, Elaine Briere, who had visited East Timor in 1974 and had taken a number of photographs of the villagers she met and the villages she stayed in. These beautiful, black-and-white photographs were later to be used extensively by solidarity groups in their publications.

After months of preparation in East Timor during 1991 to welcome a visit by a Portuguese parliamentary mission to East Timor, the sudden cancellation of the visit left a highly volatile atmosphere which exploded into a huge demonstration to pay respects to a murdered colleague on 12 November 1991. The Santa Cruz Massacre left nearly three hundred young people dead, but the presence of foreign journalists and a cameraman generated world attention when footage of the massacre at the cemetery taken by Max Stahl were shown on television screens worldwide. For the first time, Indonesian brutalities were made visible and stirred an unprecedented level of anger. This inspired the birth of the East Timor Action Network, a solidarity organisation in the US. The film, broadcast by Yorkshire Television in January 1992, *In Cold Blood*, using Max Stahl's dramatic footage, inspired activists in Ireland to create what was to become one of the most effective solidarity groups of all, under Tom Hyland, soon to become a household name in the Republic.

Following the Santa Cruz tragedy, the international solidarity movement entered a new phase. Not only was Max Stahl's footage reverberating round the world, but US journalists, Allan Nairn and Amy Goodman, who were also present at the Massacre and had almost been killed, spared no effort to campaign in Washington and throughout the country, helping to build a powerful network of groups within ETAN which became one of the most effective Washington-oriented lobbies in the country. Early in 1994, John Pilger's film, *Death of a Nation*, made in his inimitable style, generated huge interest in the UK and elsewhere.

In the UK, the issue that most successfully won nationwide sympathy for East Timor was the campaign calling for an arms embargo against Indonesia. The UK had become Suharto's most faithful arms supplier after the US. Central to the campaign was the sale of Hawk aircraft, dating back to April 1984, when TAPOL first raised the issue. Campaign Against Arms Trade, with its well-organised national network, was a constant partner in this campaign.

In January 1996, three women, Andrea Needham, Lotta Kronlid and Joanna Wilson, supported by Angie Zelter, the fourth member of the team, entered a British Aerospace military site armed with hammers and disarmed a Hawk jet being readied for Indonesia. Making no secret of their action, they informed the company of what they had just done and were promptly arrested. Their trial in July 1996 made legal history when they were acquitted by the jury in Liverpool who found that they had acted in order to prevent a greater crime, the crime of genocide. The acquittal made headline news and attracted intense public debate and attention in the UK, elevating the arms embargo issue to a new level, while keeping the situation in East Timor permanently in the foreground.

APCET held its second gathering in Kuala Lumpur in February 1995 which was attended by groups from nine countries, including two Indonesian organisations which pledged to make East Timor a major part of their campaigning in Indonesia. Not long after, Solidamor was set up in Jakarta to campaign exclusively on East Timor. The third APCET meeting was held in Bangkok in March 1998. The authorities there doing everything possible to force all the foreigners to leave and disrupt the proceedings. A

decision was taken to hold the next APCET conference in Jakarta but by the time event was convened at the end of 2000, the situation had changed dramatically. The UN was now in control of East Timor and the people had voted decisively for independence from Indonesia, so APCET held its next conference in Baucau.

Several years earlier, parliamentarians from 32 countries met in Lisbon in May-June 1995 and drew up a plan for a number of parliamentary visits to Indonesia and East Timor. Its communique called on Indonesia to abide by the UN resolutions on East Timor and urged all countries to stop selling arms to Indonesia. Shortly afterwards, a conference on 'Indonesia and Regional Conflict Resolution' in Darwin was attended by many delegates from Indonesia, reflecting the fact that East Timor was now a big issue for a number of Indonesian NGOs. Another conference at the Australian National University in Canberra on 'Peacemaking Initiatives on East Timor' in July 1995 attracted academics, human rights and peace activists as well as Indonesians and East Timorese informal leaders from inside the country. These events demonstrated the breadth of interest in Australia on the issue of East Timor.

In November 1997, when the Suharto regime was in big trouble, having been hit by the Asia financial crisis, APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Consultation) held a meeting in Vancouver attended by heads of state and heads of governments from many countries. For ten days prior to the event, thirteen exiled East Timorese and several Indonesians toured the country, calling on the authorities to 'bar Suharto or put him behind bars' for the atrocities for which he was responsible. Several thousand gathered to protest against the presence of Suharto in Vancouver, after attending a People's Summit. Realising the strength of feeling in Canada about East Timor, the Indonesian dictator had insisted on firm guarantees from the Canadian government for his protection before agreeing to attend the APEC summit. This was provided by mounted police who used pepper spray causing mayhem among the crowd and arresting forty protesters.

Another important part of the solidarity movement was the series of seminars most of which were held in Portugal throughout the 1990s, bringing together academics and activists from Indonesia and from around the world. The initiative was for these events was taken by Professor Antonio Barbedo de Magalhaes whose acquaintance with East Timor goes back many years. These meetings encouraged discussions with many mainstream Indonesian academics who were under pressure in Indonesia to keep a distance from the question of East Timor.

As we can see, the international solidarity movement with East Timor became very well organised over the years and contributed massively to informing public opinion and forcing governments and institutions to acknowledge the injustice and brutality of Indonesia's invasion and occupation. Its persistence meant that governments were not able to ignore the legitimate demands of the people of East Timor. It was a loosely organised movement, including a wide variety of groups and individuals. As the people of East Timor celebrate their independence on 20 May, those of us who worked over the years to keep this movement alive and on its toes can feel a sense of pride in what we achieved and join in these celebrations wherever we happen to be on this historic day.

