

INTERFET in East Timor

East Timor (1999-2000)

The deployment of the Australian-led INTERFET to East Timor in September 1999 was seen as a necessary step to establish the political stability the UNTAET administration needed to fulfil its tasks. The operation was prompted by the wave of Indonesian-backed violence that followed the East Timorese decision to opt for independence in a referendum. East Timor's misery began in 1974-5 when Indonesia used the turmoil that accompanied the withdrawal of Portuguese imperial rule to intervene and subsequently annex the country (Subroto 1997).

Many East Timorese resisted Indonesian occupation and thousands joined the Falintil guerrilla movement and launched an armed struggle against Indonesian rule. The Indonesian government responded severely, ethnically cleansing villages thought to be sympathetic to the rebels and deliberately causing major food shortages (Taylor 1999). Although estimates vary, it is thought that around 10,000 Indonesian soldiers were killed by the rebels and as many as 230,000 (out of a population of 630,000) East Timorese died as a result of direct Indonesian action or the malnutrition and disease that accompanied it (Dee 2001: 19n5; Shwarz 1994).

The issue attracted significant international attention in 1991 when 271 unarmed East Timorese civilians were killed and 382 wounded by the Indonesian army during a pro-independence march in Dili (Cotton 2001: 134). After Habibie replaced Suharto as Indonesian president in 1998 progress began to be made until under pressure from the UN, the government agreed to hold a referendum on independence, under UNAMET supervision. Unsurprisingly, the election resulted in an overwhelming vote for independence (78.5%) and sparked Indonesian-backed militia to unleash a wave of mass murder and looting (Bartu 2000; Fischer 2000;

Kingsbury 2000; Martinkus 2001: 51-200). Indonesia insisted that regardless of the vote, it continued to hold sovereignty over East Timor. This meant that the UN's original plan to install a UNAMET II to oversee the transition to independence was rendered unworkable. Australia pushed for an international intervention to halt the bloodshed and after coming under considerable economic and political pressure the Indonesian government accepted that it could no longer maintain order in East Timor and accepted the principle of a UN force. The Security Council authorised an Australian-led intervention (INTERFET) on 15 September 1999 under Resolution 1264. The mission was mandated to use 'all necessary means' to restore order, support the small UN civilian mission (UNAMET) and assist in the provision of humanitarian relief (Chesterman 2007: 196).

At its peak, INTERFET consisted of approximately 11,000 troops with Australia providing around one-third and ASEAN states providing a slightly smaller number (Smith with Dee 2003: 45-8). INTERFET's mission was to halt the violence in East Timor and establish the rule of law in order to allow for a transition to a UN administration that would facilitate the move to independence. To that end, INTERFET's commander, Major-General Peter Cosgrove had two primary concerns: ensuring that the Indonesian-backed militias halted their violent acts and laid down their weapons, and establishing a high level of consent and authority for the follow-on mission. As a result, the INTERFET mission was conceptualised as a peace support operation because the military forces had to be able to move between traditional peacekeeping tasks (in order to facilitate conflict resolution and lay the groundwork for the interim administration) and peace enforcement tasks (in response to specific breaches of the peace by the militias). INTERFET's task was complicated by the fact

that elements of the Indonesian military remained in the province and were hostile to the Australian military presence (Dee 2001: 11).

In order to address these difficulties the Australian military adopted a high visibility approach, including the deployment of a mechanised brigade with numerous armed vehicles. Although the potential threat to peacekeepers did not come from heavy firepower, the Australians calculated that the physical presence of this brigade would instil a sense of security and reinforce the idea that INTERFET was a force capable of protecting people, unlike the UNAMET observation mission. Despite this robust deployment and although most of the anti-independence militia had retreated to West Timor before INTERFET's deployment, militia activity remained a significant problem. Indeed, in its first five days of deployment, INTERFET raided militia compounds, confiscating weapons (Seybolt 2007: 89). Moreover, pro-Indonesian militia continued to harass and kill people in parts of East Timor that had not come under INTERFET's control and in West Timor (Seybolt 2007: 90). Within a month of deploying, INTERFET forces had engaged militia on four occasions and Indonesian security forces once (DFAT 2001: 147). In that time, INTERFET had established a presence throughout East Timor and had begun policing its border with Indonesia.

Given the almost complete collapse of state services and infrastructure, humanitarian agencies were almost entirely dependent on INTERFET and the peace support operation placed a high premium on assisting them. In addition to establishing and maintaining order, INTERFET provided logistical assistance to civilian agencies, rebuilt roads and public utilities, protected air warehouses and supported aid convoys. These activities enabled humanitarian agencies to provide much needed food, water, shelter and medical supplies and care (Mack 1999; Seybolt 2007: 90). In the absence of an indigenous judicial system, INTERFET also established a military 'quasi-

judicial' regime to temporarily detain suspected criminals, though it lacked the authority to try criminal suspects (Bull 2008: 191).

By the end of October 1999, the Security Council decided that INTERFET had created a secure environment in East Timor and established UNTAET, giving it overall responsibility for the administration of East Timor and empowering it to exercise legislative and executive authority there. The secure situation also enabled numerous NGOs and international organizations to increase their delivery of humanitarian aid. 64,000 refugees returned home, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) launched a combined appeal for funds on behalf of the UN agencies, and by the end of 1999 there were 40 humanitarian organizations working in East Timor.

The INTERFET experience in East Timor can therefore be described as an 'outstanding success' (Smith and Dee 2006: 421). It was given a clear mandate by the Security Council: to provide a basic level of security that would allow the transition to UNTAET. It had a robust mandate and the physical ability to use force effectively when. INTERFET was neither authorised nor deployed until the Security Council had a pivotal state (Australia) that could ensure that there were enough troops with sufficient capability to conduct the mission. There was also a heightened degree of cooperation both between troop contributing countries (with Australia, several ASEAN states, South Korea, Fiji and Britain contributing most of the forces) and between troop contributors and the Security Council (via Australia). That said, relatively speaking, the mission operated in a relatively benign environment: East Timor was positively disposed to the UN, there was broad consensus about the territory's future political status and there were no armed factions opposing another (Howard 2008: 268). Nevertheless, INTERFET had overcome significant challenges

in addition to mopping up the militias that remained in East Timor. For instance, upon deployment over 40 percent of the population was displaced and there was practically no transport or communication infrastructure outside the country's capital, Dili (Smith and Dee 2003: 53).

Overall, Smith and Dee (2006: 421-2) argue that INTERFET holds four important lessons about peace support operations:

1. Peace support operations must have a capable lead/pivotal state and comprise adequate forces with good war-fighting skills.
2. Successful peacekeeping depends on the degree of host-state support.
3. Peace support operations are large and expensive and therefore require a sound funding base.
4. Peacekeepers must be able to assume civilian functions until such time as civilian agencies themselves have the necessary capacity. Civilian capacity takes longer to acquire, equip and deploy than military capacity. Good civilian capacity is at least as important as good war-fighting capacity to a peace support operation.

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