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East Timor - Indonesia (1975 - 1999)

Shortly after obtaining independence from Portugal in 1974, East Timor (or Timor-Leste) was invaded by Indonesians who occupied the country until 1999. During the 25 years of Indonesian rule, armed and peaceful East Timorese groups struggled to overthrow the occupier. More than one quarter of the population is estimated to have died as a result of the fighting and associated famine. In 2002, after three years under United Nations administration, Timor-Leste became the first new nation of the 21st century.

In 1974, a coup in Portugal ousted that country's dictatorship and brought a new government into power that was committed to rapid decolonization. After a short and violent struggle with the rival Timorese Democratic Union Party (UDT,) the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) came to power in East Timor. Indonesia, whose territory already included the western half of the island of Timor, invaded East Timor in late 1975. Indonesia sought international support for its annexation of East Timor by asserting that it was preventing the spread of communism, which it claimed Fretilin advocated.

For the next decade, Fretilin and the Indonesian army engaged in low-level warfare. By the late 1980s, although Fretilin's armed wing was badly damaged, the East Timorese independence movement was still vigorous. In 1991, the Indonesian army opened fire on 4,000 pro-independence mourners at a cemetery who were burying a young student recently killed by the army. A British photojournalist filmed what became known as the Santa Cruz massacre, which left over 200 dead. The footage aired on televisions in the Europe and the United States, and for the first time the United States government condemned Indonesian violence.

In 1996, the conflict received more global attention when two East Timorese, Bishop Carlos Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta were awarded the Nobel Peace prize. In the wake of the Asian currency crisis in 1997 and continued international pressure, Indonesian President Suharto resigned, leaving B.J. Habibie as interim president. Habibie offered conditional autonomy to East Timor and, when the pro-independence forces rejected it, proposed a referendum to determine its status. In 1999, the United Nations monitored the referendum, which had a 99% turnout. Despite widespread intimidation by the Indonesian military and the pro-Indonesian militia, 78% of the electorate voted for independence. In the two weeks following the vote, the Indonesian army and pro-Indonesian militia drove hundreds of thousands of East Timorese into West Timor under dire humanitarian conditions, and wrecked havoc on East Timor's infrastructure, destroying an estimated 70-80% of businesses and 50% of all homes in the capital, Dili. The United Nations belatedly sent in a peacekeeping force, which remained during the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) until the country became fully independent in 2002. East Timor is currently the poorest nation in Asia.

Print Resources

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Hill, Hal (2001) "Tiny, Poor and War-Torn: Development Policy Challenges for East Timor," *World Development*, vol. 29, no. 7.

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East Timor Action Network.

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Timeline

1974 - Portuguese coup opens doors for decolonization

1975 - Portuguese government leaves E. Timor; short civil war brings Fretilin to power; Indonesia invades

1976 - Indonesia formally annexes East Timor

1983 - United Nations recognizes East Timor's right to independence

1991 - Santa Cruz massacre kills over 200 pro-independence supporters

1996 - East Timor independence activists Bishop Carlos Belo and José Ramos-Horta win Nobel Peace Prize

1997 - Asian currency crisis

1998 - Indonesian President Suharto resigns, Habibie takes over, offers East Timor autonomy

1999 - referendum shows 78% of East Timor favor independence; Indonesian military attacks civilians, homes and businesses; UNTAET established

2001 - East Timor Constituent Assembly elected

2002 - East Timor becomes independent