

# East Timor: An ASEAN-UN Solution

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This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor. This article is by Walden Bello, Executive Director of Focus on the Global South.

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Perspective Sept. 8, 1999

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By Walden Bello

The world failed East Timor once, in 1975, when it offered little protest to the bloody annexation of that country by Indonesia. Key international actors, including Australia, the United States, and ASEAN, either supported the takeover behind the scenes or tacitly approved of it. For the next 24 years, many governments engaged in a conspiracy of silence as over 200,000 Timorese lost their lives under Jakarta's harsh rule.

The world cannot afford to fail the people of East Timor again. As Indonesian troops and Indonesia-supported militiamen wreak mayhem on the people after the historic vote for independence last week, it is imperative that the international community acts to prevent an act of ethnic cleansing on the scale of Bosnia and Kosovo.

The Indonesian government's putting East Timor under martial law "to restore peace and order," as Foreign Minister Ali Alatas put it, is an Orwellian joke with grisly implications. Jakarta is not out to curb the militia thugs that it has armed and set on an unarmed people. The Indonesian military is out to greatly reinforce its bloody rule and to make this permanent, in defiance of the Timorese majority's historic opting for independence last week.

There are several immediate steps that the international community must take.

The United Nations must immediately constitute an armed peacekeeping mission and send it to Timor within hours. Every minute now counts if we are to prevent the uncontrolled taking of thousands of civilian lives.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) must call an emergency meeting of its foreign ministers to condemn the Indonesian government's abetting the massacre and offer police and troops from its member countries--with the exception of Indonesia--to serve as the core of the UN peacekeeping mission. This must be made even without the Indonesian government's approval.

The Philippine Government must take the lead in this enterprise, working closely with the Thai government, ASEAN's other liberal democracy. ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino, a respected member of the Philippine foreign service, must firmly advise his Indonesian hosts that this time, the Philippines and ASEAN are prepared to break with Jakarta.

Such a move is long overdue and will go some way toward rectifying the Philippines' and ASEAN's pusillanimous record on East Timor, the highlights of which were the member states' unwillingness over 24 years to challenge Jakarta's annexation and repression, the Fidel Ramos administration's banning of the Asia Pacific Committee on East Timor (APCET) meeting in Manila in 1994, and the Ramos and Chuan Leek Pai governments' banning of Timorese representatives like Jose Ramos Horta from entering their respective countries.

ASEAN has long been part of the problem. It must now be part of the solution.

ASEAN's moves must be coordinated with the United Nations. The UN General Assembly must convoke a special session to immediately recognize East Timor's independence and impose sanctions on Indonesia for failing to provide the order and security that it promised in the Tripartite Agreement of May 5, 1999.

ASEAN and the UN must call on the Indonesian government to immediately withdraw its police and soldiers, disarm the militiamen, and stop expelling Timorese from their homeland on the pretext of helping them escape the violence.

ASEAN and the UN must compel the Indonesian government to immediately recognize the overwhelming vote for independence and guarantee the safety of independence leader Xanana Gusmao, and allow Gusmao, Archbishop Carlos Belo, Jose Ramos Horta, and other key Timorese personalities to freely travel through Indonesia and to East Timor to participate in the process of constituting a government.

A great part of the cause of the East Timor tragedy was Washington and

Canberra's complicity in the Indonesian takeover of 1975. This historical debacle cannot now be undone by a unilateral commitment of US and Australian troops to that country. The short-term gains of such a move would be outweighed by the long-term instability and conflict into which it would plunge Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. All commitments of armed peacekeepers to East Timor must be done under the mandate of the UN and ASEAN.

The international community must act now to spare a small nation whose identity was forged in 24 years of heroic defiance of repression from further bloodshed.

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