

Jakarta Must Prevent the Escalation of Violence

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This is the fifth in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor.

This article is by Donald K. Emmerson, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Asia/Pacific Research Center. It originally appeared in the International Herald Tribune on September 6.

Jakarta Must Prevent the Escalation of Violence

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By Donald K. Emmerson

DILI, East Timor - The decolonization of East Timor has passed a critical test. Under UN supervision, 98.6 percent of the registered voters braved intimidation to come to polling stations and choose between autonomy within Indonesia or separation from it. Of the ballots cast, 78.5 percent favored independence. Now a new phase has begun: the implementation of independence against the wishes of the losing side and its Indonesian allies. Rampant violence threatens the successful completion of this phase. This is violence that the Indonesian government expressly promised to prevent.

Jakarta must now stop the bloodshed and rescue its already damaged international standing. If it allows the killing to continue, it will reap global opprobrium as an unreliable and irresponsible state.

A recent stay in East Timor, where I helped to monitor the vote last Monday for the Carter Center, leaves me convinced that Jakarta is not meeting its obligations under the agreement it signed on May 5 with the UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan, and with Portugal. In that accord, Jakarta promised to provide security prior to and following the ballot. At Jakarta's insistence, the United Nations would only provide unarmed advisers to the Indonesian police.

The remarkably high turnout last Monday testifies to the courage of the voters in resisting intimidation by the armed militias that have been operating with impunity throughout the territory. Had Jakarta fulfilled its security obligations, the police would have disarmed these paramilitary gangs months ago.

For all that time the militias have made the roads unsafe. Returning with a colleague to Dili on the day after the vote, I encountered five roadblocks set by militias east of the city. Security within Dili, meanwhile, appeared to us nonexistent. Men in black militia T-shirts roamed the streets brandishing weapons. The police were nowhere to be seen.

On Wednesday, militia activity intensified outside UN headquarters in Dili. Three people were killed, more were injured and hundreds fled into the UN compound. Yet according to an American journalist who was himself beaten by militia members, it took the police 90 minutes to arrive on the scene.

Since the polling day, the death toll has mounted into double digits. This shows how abjectly Jakarta has failed to secure the territory. That the militias were originally armed and abetted by Indonesian forces underscores Jakarta's responsibility to rein them in.

If the Indonesian government cannot be relied upon to make even a good faith effort to suppress the militias, despite its explicit agreement to ensure local security, then how can it expect to be trusted by foreign governments on other matters?

If the United Nations is now forced to escalate its mission from managing a plebiscite to restoring and keeping peace, or if an Australian-proposed "coalition of the willing" must intervene to restore order, Indonesia will not be remembered for its realism and foresight in allowing the East Timorese to be consulted on their future. Jakarta might instead be recalled as complicit and hypocritical for having failed to meet its international obligation to stop the violence. East Timor has chosen. It is Indonesia's turn.

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