

THE DANGEROUS MILITIAS IN EAST TIMOR

Walter Dorn, Peace Studies Program, Cornell University

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On August 30, the long-suffering people of East Timor will have their first opportunity after almost 500 years of colonialism to choose their own future: to exist within Indonesia or move to independence. There remains, however, a great threat to the "freedom and fairness" of the UN-sponsored referendum (or "popular consultation" as it is officially called), namely the notorious pro-integration militias. These groups, which are backed by elements of the Indonesian armed forces, have already done much damage to the electoral process through their acts of killing, injury and intimidation against the Timorese population and even against the staff of the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET).

While serving with UNAMET for the past two months, my colleagues and I witnessed and personally verified many cases of intimidation by these militias in the southwest region of East Timor called Suai. The militias have murdered and intimidated with impunity (as well as seeming immunity) many of their political opponents, i.e., those who oppose integration with Indonesia. By reviewing these recent actions, we can gauge the future threat.

The militias sought to prevent certain people from voting by threatening them with death if they registered. As an example, J came to a UNAMET registration centre in the Suai region with great fear and trepidation. He said that he and his people were risking their lives by coming. As a former member of the Portuguese army and a supporter of the pro-independence forces, he had reason to be worried. His dead body was found by UNAMET staff only a few days later in his house. Similarly, the militias told the priest in nearby Zumalai that if he continued in conduct mass in the area, he would be killed. The priest fled his parish and took refuge in the main church in Suai.

Entire villages, known to be pro-independence, were uprooted at night when militias came shooting and killing. For instance, I registered many of the 500 people of Laegatar in Zumalai who were displaced on 17 July. They reported leaving in desperation with only what they could carry and now they feared to return home. Some of them made it to the church in Suai, where they could register at the school next door; others remained in the forest.

Intimidation was even directed against UN staff. After I insisted at the outset that registration/polling sites be established in a Catholic School in Zumalai and in a village farther north in the mountains, I was accused of being a spy (for whom they did not say) and told that my security and that of my team "could not be guaranteed." Only when the UN relented two days later and accepted the site requested by militia (which was next to their base), were the threats against me withdrawn. Still, most of the local staff continued to receive death threats for working with UNAMET, and many have quit under such pressure. It is not known how many will show up for polling day.

After one of my local staff identified West Timorese who were registering with false names and birthplaces, a group of armed militia members came to his house. By that time, fortunately, he had already been tipped off and had fled (like the priest in Zumalai) to the over-crowded church grounds in Suai. The militias continue to patrol outside the church compound and have threatened several times to attack it.

Before joining UNAMET, one of our interpreters, S, had been the subject of three attempted assassinations in Dili, the East Timorese capital where he was teaching. When I visited his home village with him, many people wept at seeing him. They said that the last militia team had

returned from Dili boasting that they had accomplished their job. Now the villagers saw the resurrection of S. It was pleasant to see him face to face, as an UNAMET interpreter, with the man who had ordered his assassination. But I still fear for his future. (He said he was not be afraid to die working for his cause.)

Before being employed by UNAMET as a driver, C had been abducted by the militias. When he refused to join he was beaten and left for dead. Later, he stopped near his home village with his UNAMET team. As with S, some local people were seen weeping. He explained that once someone was taken by the militias, they usually joined or turned up dead. C was a fortunate exception.

The militias also tried to use traditional rituals to influence villagers. They sponsored blood-drinking ceremonies at various locations. Such rituals are sometimes used by the inhabitants of East Timor when a grave decision is facing them and a village is to be bonded by a common oath, which is secured by drinking the blood of a goat. In Ogues, the ceremony was to be held in the yard in front of the UNAMET centre the very night before registration was to begin. But the attempt at coercion failed: the majority of the villagers fled to the forest for the night in order to avoid making a false pledge of allegiance. They turned up the next morning for an introductory briefing we gave at the UNAMET centre.

Many militia members come from West Timor, the Indonesian province that occupies the other half of the Island. Some of them tried to register with UNAMET using false names. Others gave correct names but claimed to be born in East Timor. One individual, after failing three times to give a correct name or birthplace, claimed eligibility by reason of marriage to an East Timorese woman in a traditional marriage. However, the woman admitted privately to UNAMET that her real husband was dead. When the militia member was refused registration, he threatened to break the windows of the registration centre, to kill local staff and to divorce his alleged wife.

Other means of general intimidation and population control include militia checkpoints at most villages. In some cases, a system of passes has been set up. Some militia carry weapons, even automatic rifles, in blatant violation of the law and UNAMET guidelines. They drill openly, often with sticks, in playing fields and march through the streets shouting slogans. They are most readily identified when they wear their black T-shirts with their insignia.

Many of the militia leaders are former or current policemen, soldiers or government officials. Some use their official positions to intimidate the population. The opening of mail has been verified in at least one area. During registration, village chiefs (Kepala Desas) with close ties to the militia signed and stamped documents with false information stating for instance, that militia members were born in East Timor, though they openly admitted under questioning that they were born in West Timor. In some cases, the village chiefs witnessed and even made false signatures for priests and church officials in order to register a voter.

The dark plans of the militia to influence the voting on consultation day became clear during our the first few days in Zumalai: they wanted to control access and intimidate persons at to the polling site. During the registration period, many people avoided militia and military bases, sometimes walking for hours to go around these sites. The militia will clearly try to cordon off the area around the polling centre with rings of their members and with checkpoints on critical roads to stop people known to support independence. One man hiding in the bushes with an automatic weapon can do a lot to dissuade people from travelling along a road.

The militia leaders in Zumalai also wanted to build new structures for voting. They told us these structures were to be in the traditional East Timorese style--open on all sides. This would make it easy for militia to intimidate voters as they are about to mark their ballots. Small signals can go a long way in a society where fear is ever-present. The infamous cold stare from the local militia

leader has sent a shudder down the backs of many a Timorese and even some UNAMET staff. Fortunately, the UN will hold firm on this one. Voting will take place indoors behind specially made polling booths. Thus intimidation at the actual moment of voting will be more difficult.

It is vitally important that the UN conduct patrols along the roads leading to polling sites in militia-controlled areas. UN monitors can ask locals travelling along the road if there are any bottlenecks, sites they fear, or suspicious locations which can be investigated. UNAMET has the authority to do such patrolling as it is essential in order to establish the freeness and fairness of the vote.

The time of greatest danger will be after the consultation when the result is announced. If the result of the consultation is rejection of Indonesia's offer, then the militias will no doubt attempt to thwart moves towards independence. They will say that UNAMET was not neutral and the ballot was not fair, as they have already begun stating. Furthermore, some militia leaders have already said that if they cannot win their cause peacefully (i.e., at the ballot box) then they are ready to take up arms. The militia in the Zumalai/Ainaro area is called MAHIDI, which is an abbreviation for Integration, Dead or Alive." The militias have the capability of causing widespread mayhem or even civil war.

What is crucially necessary is to introduce a United Nations peace-keeping military force. Expanding UNAMET as soon as possible to include the traditional military component, equipped with small arms, will go a long way to dissuading the militias from full scale attacks. The UN can thus greatly increase the security that is necessary for a peaceful consultation and post-consultation period. The UN soldiers could guard important installations and patrol key roads. They could verify that arms are not transferred to the militias from the Indonesian armed forces and police. UNAMET II can help create a new police force and build up an independent judiciary. The Security Council and its members should call for and support the rapid deployment of such a force. Indonesia should accept it.

For the newly elected civilian government that is to take office in Jakarta this fall, East Timor will be the litmus test of its respect for democracy, a process that brought it to power. It must respect the outcome of the referendum and support an expanded UNAMET mandate. It should not support or permit the militias to undermine the human rights of the East Timorese.

The East Timor people can indeed have a brighter future after centuries of suffering and decades of war. There are dark clouds on the horizon, to be sure. But these can be dispelled by a strong UN presence. The sun of hope can rise in East Timor.

Walter Dorn is a Senior Research Fellow at Cornell University and a faculty member of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre. He has also served as the UN representative of Science for Peace since 1983 and as a Training Adviser to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations since 1998.