

East Timor: forced resettlement

by John G Taylor

For many years Indonesia has experienced substantial movements of population as a direct result of government policies.

Transmigration programmes implemented during Suharto's rule resulted in the movement of 1.6 million people, mostly from Java, Bali and Madura to Kalimantan, Sumatra, the Moluccas, Sulawesi and the islands of Eastern Indonesia. Transmigration was viewed both as a demographic imperative - to alleviate population pressure in Java where 80 per cent of the population live - and as an ideological unifier through which Indonesia's many and varied ethnic communities would become more integrated. Transmigration was implemented in a highly authoritarian manner with the army ruthlessly suppressing any protest.

Since the resignation of Suharto in May 1998, widespread resentment against the government, army and transmigrants has been exacerbated by economic and political changes. The 14 per cent fall in gross domestic product in 1998, the flight of capital and dramatic increase in unemployment have been accompanied by massive increases in the prices of food and basic essentials. Under such conditions it is hardly surprising that conflicts between communities with differential and unequal access to resources have increased. While economic decline has hit the urban areas of Java particularly hard¹, some of Indonesia's island regions have suffered less. Areas exporting primary and agricultural commodities have benefited from the devaluation of the Indonesian rupiah that has been a feature of the crisis. As Jakarta's economic control has weakened and local revenues have increased, there have been growing demands for greater regional control, autonomy and independence in areas such as Aceh (North Sumatra) and Irian Jaya. Regional protests have been directed both at the central government and transmigrant groups who are seen as having benefited from Jakarta's dominance.

These developments have taken place while Indonesia attempts a precarious

transition to a less authoritarian system, a key feature of which was the 7 June national election. Political and military groups opposed to this development are fuelling and manipulating ethnic and regional conflicts in an attempt to 'prove' that the country is not ready for a democratic transition.

In recent months Indonesia has experienced increasing levels of ethnic conflict and regional protest. Minor events have resulted in conflagrations. Since January more than 50,000 people have left the Moluccan islands while 16,000 Madurese have been driven out by Dayak and Malay villages in West Kalimantan (Borneo).

Nowhere are the consequences of transmigration clearer than in the Indonesian occupied territory of East Timor which since 1979 has been subjected to forced resettlement of its population.

East Timor

Indonesian Armed Forces invaded East Timor on 7 December 1975. The invasion aimed to annex East Timor into the Indonesian Republic by force, halting a decolonization process poised to create a new state after 450 years of Portuguese colonial rule. Frustrated by their inability to make significant military headway against the nationalist movement, Fretilin, Indonesian troops began to terrorise the population living outside Fretilin-held areas. Villages were destroyed, atrocities committed and chemical weapons used. In March 1976, Lopez da Cruz, an East Timorese member of the Indonesian-created administration, claimed that 60,000 East Timorese had been killed in the months following the invasion.

A qualitatively new phase of the Indonesian campaign began in September 1977 when aerial attacks were launched against Fretilin areas in the western, central and southern areas

of East Timor. Saturation bombing of villages was accompanied by defoliation of ground cover. People were pushed into increasingly confined areas. Deprived of food, they were forced into lower-lying regions, where Indonesian troops lay in wait. Throughout 1978 a spate of massacres was reported.

In the aftermath of these campaigns most surviving inhabitants were transported to staging posts and then to newly created resettlement camps. In mid-1979 USAID estimated that 300,000 of the pre-invasion population of 680,000 were living in resettlement camps. East Timorese confined to camps claimed they were prevented from travelling beyond the camp boundaries and were unable either to cultivate or harvest food. Describing conditions in a camp south of the capital, Dili, a journalist (whose visit had been organized by the Indonesian government) wrote: "In Remexio, as in other villages, the people are stunned, sullen and dispirited. Emaciated as a result of deprivation and hardship, they are struggling to make sense of the nightmarish interlude in which as much as half the population was uprooted."²

Most East Timorese were subsequently transferred to new 'resettlement villages' sited far away from their original homes. Located close to newly constructed roads or at intersections, these villages comprised groups of huts constructed of grass or palm leaves. Outer areas were occupied by the military, local militia and camp administrators who lived in houses with galvanised iron roofs.

Village sites were chosen by the military for strategic reasons. People were rehoused in zones far from areas of resistance. Any potential re-emergence of resistance based on traditional units such as the clan, hamlet or village was undermined by a policy of dispersal. Villages were often built in lowland areas traditionally avoided by East Timorese mountain villagers because of malaria, poor water supplies and the torrid climate.

Each resettlement village was subjected to rigorous control. All movement in and out was allowed only to selected villagers given a *surat jalan* (travel pass). Cultivation was not permitted within the village confines. Either as a form of sanction or as a result of security measures, garden-tending outside the village was often curtailed by the military, exacerbating food shortages. In 1988, a Catholic Relief Services worker wrote: "The main problem in the resettlement camps is shortage of food. The areas where people are allowed to go are very restricted. Most families can only have 100-200 square metres of ground, which is insufficient to feed a family. They have to fall back on collecting wild fruit, roots and leaves; these are also in insufficient quantities because the army forbids them to go far from the camp."³

The Indonesian military restricted the use of labour for domestic cultivation. Camp residents were directed into forced work - building roads and houses, logging and cultivation of sugar, coffee, rice and other export crops.

With traditional settlement patterns dramatically altered, the army embarked on a widespread economic and social transformation of East Timorese society. Fundamental social features - the extended family, kinship system, religion and education - were undermined as the army set out to replace them with institutions akin to Javanese norms and culture. Timorese labour on small farms, gardens run by army officers and plantations located beyond village boundaries were used to produce cash crops for export in what the army termed a "gigantic project, to reinforce stability and security and facilitate all aspects of development".⁴ By 1984 there were 400 resettlement villages. By 1990 almost all East Timorese were living in them.

A new element was added to the Indonesian strategy in 1982 when non-Timorese began to be moved to fertile areas such as Ermera, Bobonaro and Maliana. They were given land formerly used by East Timorese farmers who, without compensation, were moved to infertile lowlands on the northern coastal plain. In the aftermath of the

well-publicised Santa Cruz cemetery massacre in November 1991 (in which an estimated 160 people were killed or injured) the military intensified migration of families - and particularly traders - into the towns and villages. Migrants, from Sulawesi, Maluku and neighbouring islands such as Roti, were given privileged access to trade and markets and have displaced indigenous traders. Current estimates put the number of Indonesian migrants in East Timor at between 150,000 and 200,000, approximately a quarter of the present

population of 850,000. In recent years, protests have been directed increasingly at these traders, most notably those who control the country's main market in Dili which now has no East Timorese traders.

There is a widespread fear of a 'Balkanization' of Indonesia.

Referendum

The post-Suharto government, led by Suharto's former political ally, B J Habibie, has apparently made a *volte-face*, offering East Timor the possibility of independence if a majority of its population reject autonomy within the Indonesian Republic in a UN-supervised referendum scheduled for 8 August. Habibie appears to have made this decision to gain international support on an issue which had become a profound embarrassment for Indonesia after the award of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize to two East Timorese, Bishop Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta for their work for a "just and peaceful solution" of the conflict. Habibie also seems to have been convinced by arguments stressing the economic costs of maintaining the territory under present conditions.

The consequences of the political tool of resettlement and transmigration are now having a profound effect on attempts to establish conditions for self-determination in East Timor. Habibie's decision has not gained approval in key political circles - most notably among leading military officers whose careers were built on the basis of military campaigns in East Timor and who still retain economic assets there. Many leading politicians and military officers are deeply concerned at Habibie's policy shift and fear that independence for East Timor will have a knock-on effect in regions of Indonesia where there are

increasing demands for regional autonomy. There is a widespread fear of a 'Balkanization' of Indonesia. During the campaign for the June elections, Megawati Sukarnoputri, the leader of the PDI (Indonesian Democratic Party in Struggle), Indonesia's most popular party, suggested that a new government could over-rule any decision reached in East Timor's referendum. She has argued against an autonomous status for East Timor, as this would be prejudicial to the unity of the Indonesian Republic.

Military campaigns

Following the announcement of a referendum on the autonomy proposals, many transmigrants began to leave East Timor. Articles in the regional and Indonesian press described the 'threats' and 'intimidation' faced by migrants. In February Dili was reported to be gripped by a panic, with professionals such as doctors, engineers and teachers fleeing along with transmigrant traders. A propaganda campaign orchestrated by groups within Indonesian military intelligence gave Indonesians the impression of a territory divided, unsure of its future, with supporters of independence potentially in conflict with those favouring the status quo. A country that had fought for its independence for 23 years was presented as incapable of self-government and vindictive towards its non-indigenous population.⁵

As support for the referendum increased both within East Timor and internationally - spurred by the UN agreeing to oversee the vote - political and military groups opposed to the government's policies began to implement a destabilisation campaign. They relied heavily upon tactics developed and refined during earlier resettlement programmes. Pro-integrationist groups in the Indonesian armed forces organized well-armed paramilitary gangs comprised of East Timorese who have served in the Indonesian army and administration, transmigrants and new arrivals from areas such as Flores and West (Indonesian) Timor. These groups have intimidated the local population, burnt villages, killed individuals and families and engaged in widespread torture. The worst incident occurred on 6 April as more than 2,000 people were sheltering in the church of San Antonius in Liquica to the west of Dili having fled from burning villages and targeted killing by para-military gangs. The church was

attacked by a heavily armed group calling itself the Besi Merah Putih - the Red and White Iron. After the attack - which lasted several hours - 52 people were officially pronounced dead. Human rights investigators from Dili who later visited the site put the final death toll at 300.⁶ Similar attacks - although on a smaller scale - have taken place in many areas of East Timor in recent months and most recently in Dili itself.

Paramilitaries have called for a 'cleansing' of all those in favour of independence.⁷ The tactics they are using replicate those used to intimidate the population in resettlement villages. They aim to 'prove' that the territory is unfit for self-rule. A further tactic is being used to systematically undermine the referendum. As paramilitaries sweep through villages, families are once again made homeless and are being driven into new camps controlled by the paramilitaries. This has resulted in substantial new population movement and forced resettlement. Approximately 54,000 people have already been displaced this year, with the majority of them being driven into paramilitary camps. At the end of May, it was reported that 36,000 displaced people in camps in the western part of the territory were totally reliant on militias for food.⁸ This strategy aims both to intimidate people into voting for the autonomy proposals and to control population movement to restrict access to the referendum. The paramilitaries, assisted by military officials, are moving people from Indonesian Timor into East Timor, locating them in camps and issuing them with East Timorese identity cards before placing them in villages in preparation for the referendum. Resettlement is thus being used to sabotage the prospects for a free and fair vote on the autonomy proposals. The goal is to ensure that East Timor remains within the Indonesian Republic despite the desire for independence of the vast majority of its population.

Whether or not the pro-integration factions within the Indonesian Armed Forces can succeed with their strategy of destabilisation is of crucial significance not only for the future of East Timor but for Indonesia itself. If a genuine vote is not allowed in East Timor this does not bode well for populations in areas of Indonesia calling for greater autonomy. For provinces outside Java, who feel that they have suffered for decades from

central government control, the most important issue of reform is greater political and economic control over their regions. This aspiration must be addressed and not simply suppressed by military force.

The adverse results of 30 years of using transmigration and resettlement to reinforce military control are now all too apparent in Indonesia. They have contributed to the difficulties facing the country in its fragile transition to a more open political system. The process of change has to address the issue of migration. Java is densely populated and families and communities in Indonesia's regions will always want to move to areas where they will be less disadvantaged. The hope must be that this can occur in a more participatory and democratic way freed from the coercive strategies of a centralizing military-dominated government. East Timor is a special case in that, unlike Indonesia's regions, it was invaded, occupied and forcibly annexed into the Indonesian Republic. Nonetheless, the way in which Indonesia's Armed Forces react to the referendum in East Timor will speak volumes on its perspectives for the future political development of Indonesia. Military strategy with regard to resettlement and its consequences will, in the coming months, be of key importance to Indonesia's political evolution.

Postscript

Following a three month campaign of intimidation by pro-integrationist paramilitaries, the referendum on East Timor's future was held on 31 August. In a turnout of 98.5 per cent of the population, 78.3 per cent voted to leave the Indonesian Republic.

Enraged by the outcome, the paramilitaries and their Indonesian Army commanders launched a campaign to destroy the territory and forcibly remove vast numbers of its population to Indonesian West Timor and other regions of the Indonesian archipelago. An estimated 100,000 have been moved while some 200,000 have fled to the mountainous interior to escape the army and paramilitaries. Supporters of the independence movement have been targeted and murdered. Entire villages' inhabitants have been killed. The Indonesian army barracks is now one of the few intact buildings in Dili.

Having voted for independence, and having been assured of their safety by the UN during the post-referendum period, the East Timorese found themselves alone, facing the wrath of the paramilitaries and Indonesian troops.

If the international peacekeeping force is able to establish itself throughout the territory it may be able to halt the killings and feed a starving terrorised population. The peace-keepers will then have to face the vast task of locating and returning all those forcibly displaced by Indonesia's 'final solution' in East Timor - the eradication of people who bravely voted for their independence, after fighting for the right to exercise self-determination during 24 years of brutal Indonesian occupation.

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1 The Indonesian Family Life Survey, analysing welfare changes between Aug/Sept 1997 and Aug/Sept 1998 concluded that spending in urban areas fell by 34%, compared with rural declines of 13%.

2 David Jenkins 'Timor's Arithmetic of Despair', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, no 29, December 1978.

3 Antonio Tavares, interviewed by Jean-Pierre Catry, Lisbon, 1988.

4 Statement by the Secretary-General of the Department of the Interior, Topik, Jakarta, 18 July 1984.

5 Despite the fact that since the fall of Suharto the territory had not witnessed violent protest, and that during the June-September period, large peaceful demonstrations had been held supporting independence. Forums had also been held in Dili and the main towns, with people from all political groups working together to devise programmes for the territory's future development.

6 John Aglionby, 'Massacre that made Liquica a ghost town', *Guardian*, London, 14.4.99

7 Patricia Nunn and David Watts, 'Death Toll Rises as militias seize Timor's capital', *Times*, London 19.4.99

8 Reuters report from Dili, *Jumat*, 28.5.99

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