

Report on East Timor crisis of 2006

by Ana Gomes

I visited Timor Leste from 20 to 25 May, 2006. It is the world's youngest nation, still the poorest nation in Asia and one that I know well.

I witnessed the deterioration of the dramatic security and political crisis that led the East Timorese authorities to request foreign troops to help control wanton violence and restore law and order. Hundreds of international peacekeepers have now returned to East Timor to disarm rival factions of soldiers, police and armed civilian gangs. Dozens of people have been killed, many more are wounded, and tens of thousands of panicked residents have fled the capital and remain in the surrounding hills for over a month now, or are displaced under the protection of the church, the UN or embassies. An humanitarian crisis is looming, since food and fuel shortages have started.

During my stay I met with President Xanana Gusmão, Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, Foreign Minister Ramos Horta, Ministers of Defence and State Administration, the Commander of the Armed Forces, several MPs including former Indonesian Governor Mario Carrascalão, Bishops Nascimento and Ricardo; many other East Timorese friends and acquaintances; the EU, World Bank and ICRC delegates and accredited diplomats and UN officers; and journalists who have been covering East Timor for long.

The immediate background of the crisis

The immediate cause of the crisis was a split in the military, based on longstanding complaints about discrimination between commanders (guerrilla veterans, mostly "lorosae" - from the eastern part of the island) and new recruits (mostly "loromuno" - from the more populated areas of the west). The government had allowed these complaints to remain unaddressed since 2004, despite the pressure and the strong warnings from the President on the serious political implications of the crisis and the potential for the growing fault lines to lead to unrest. A group of 600 "petitioners" (more than one third of the armed forces) were expelled for disobedience in March. In April, demonstrations by the "petitioners" were infiltrated by gangs and turned violent, but the Police blatantly failed to control them, despite being well trained and too well armed, fuelling suspicions that the police forces themselves were also being manipulated (the Home Affairs Minister, a "loromuno" with a charismatic name, but also a criminal past and shady business deals, is very much distrusted, including by some peers in the government). Without consulting the President, the Prime Minister ordered the Armed Forces to subdue rebellious policemen and "petitioners", in a confrontation which caused dozens of wounded and a disputed numbers of deaths. This fuelled more rebellions, the perception of an ethnic conflict along a "lorosae-loromuno" fault line and panic among residents who fled the capital.

This escalation also exposed the depth of longstanding divergences between President Xanana Gusmão and Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri regarding the governance of the country. The rifts damaged the authority and credibility of both in the eyes of the population. The constitutional system does not help sorting out such disagreements. Also, legislative and presidential elections to be held soon, in 2007, do not contribute to reducing tensions. A Congress of the ruling party, FRETILIN, which took place 17 to 20 May, also failed to diffuse growing social and political tensions and indeed reflected a siege mentality: internal dissent was crushed by a vote by show of hands, which resulted in a 97% backing for the Secretary General/Prime Minister. Since early May, the Prime Minister has repeatedly declared that a «constitutional coup» is in preparation to dissolve Parliament and remove his government.

Call for a foreign intervention to restore security

The first time the President, Prime Minister and the Parliament Speaker appeared publicly united since this crisis erupted was on 24 May, to jointly ask for help from Australia, Portugal, Malaysia and New Zealand to urgently send security forces to help restore law and order.

Obviously, Australians were to provide the bulk of the troops and be the first ones to intervene. Given the clear media campaign in Australia since March, all East Timorese leaders shared the perception that Australian troops would come in - whether asked to do so or not - arguably to guarantee the security of Australian citizens, in view of the blatant failures of the East Timorese Police and Army, who were by then busy battling each other, with some elements handing out arms to civilians, according to media reports.

The underlying political crisis is still to be solved

President Xanana Gusmão announced two days ago that in view of the evident governance failure to restore order, he would take responsibility for security in the country, invoking exceptional powers provided for by the Constitution as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. The Prime Minister, however, refused relinquishing governmental responsibility arguing that the Constitution does not confer such exceptional powers.

The underlying political crisis is thus still to be solved. In the coming days a compromise solution may be announced – such as a reshuffle of the government (yesterday it was announced that the Ministers of Defence and Home Affairs would resign) and recognition of the Presidents's commanding role in restoring law and order and restructuring national security forces.

But my conviction is that the political crisis will not be solved until the institutional confidence and dialogue between the Government and the President of the Republic are fully reestablished – and that may be too difficult and too late today, regrettably. Although there is a principled need to uphold constitutional legality and the rule of law, decisive factors of political and historical legitimacy can not be overlooked.

Against his will and much of his good action in government, the Prime Minister is a focus of complaint from many relevant sectors in East Timorese society, while at the same time being blamed for the crisis. These feelings are shared by Australia, Timor Leste's powerful and unavoidable neighbour. Despite being recognized as a serious and competent interlocutor by the donor community, namely the World Bank, and being backed by his own party, Mari Alkatiri has not been able to nurture a good relationship with relevant entities and institutions in the East Timorese society, namely the President and the Catholic Church (the latter even more crucial, since Alkatiri is a Muslim). Also, his communication skills are very poor, helping to fuel an image of aloofness and insensitivity in the eyes of the people, which do not credit him for progress since they continue to live in tremendous poverty (average per capita income is \$1 a day).

The fact that the media still do not reach the whole territory only facilitates the spreading of rumours and erroneous and mischievous information. One member of the government who throughout the current crisis demonstrated ability to communicate and mediate between all relevant actors, while at the same time being listened to by the population, is Foreign Minister Ramos Horta. He and President Xanana still command authority and prestige in the eyes of the East Timorese people, but that will tend to erode as the crisis is prolonged.

The unavoidable neighbour

It is not Indonesia, this time. Jakarta has sensibly been abstaining from interference (although some disgruntled former East Timorese/Indonesian militia might use the opportunity to sell arms and infiltrate criminal gangs).

This time (as indeed before the 1975 Indonesian invasion) the big foreign player is Australia, where several sectors with vested interests have always tried to present East Timorese statehood as an enterprise destined to fail.

The East Timorese Prime Minister takes pride and deserves credit for the tough way he negotiated an agreement with Australia on the sharing of oil resources in the Timor Sea, which will represent tens of billions of dollars over the next 40 years to help East Timor emerge from its status as the poorest nation in Asia. Analysts believe that income from the Bayu-Undan field alone will meet East Timor's budgetary needs for at least 15 years. Realizing that much more than money, East Timor needs technical support and programs to reduce poverty and to foster education and development, the Prime Minister established an Oil Trust Fund. The World Bank and the UN praised this Oil Trust Fund, meant to guarantee a prudent management of the oil wealth and savings for future generations.

Nevertheless, everyone in East Timor realizes now that such a successful agreement sparked resentment in some Australian quarters, triggering a reaction: many in East Timor, and not just in the Prime Minister's camp, see Australian hands in the fuelling of dissent, ethnic division and general instability in order to deepen the current crisis. To the point where a call for Australian forces became inevitable (while other troop contributing nations are called upon in a desperate attempt to secure some multilateral character for the operation). The general feeling in East Timor is that

Australian security forces will need to stay for long and will find ways to justify staying for ever.

Background: East Timor a UN "success story"

One should recall that East Timor, after centuries of Portuguese colonial rule and 24 years of Indonesian occupation, became independent on 20 May 2002, but continued to be assisted by the UN in the process of building state structures from scratch. The UNSC decided on 13 May to renew UNOTIL's presence for one more month only, despite the fact that the UNSG proposed that its mandate should be renewed for one year and capacities reinforced in the field of security sector reform. Resistance to the UNSG proposal came from the USA (to which many in Dili also attribute a particular agenda, converging with certain Australian interests).

Before the current crisis, East Timor was seen as a tremendous «success story» and was even touted as a model for post conflict endeavours. It used to be remarkably safe - until the current crisis - for a country in which only 20% of the working age population is formally employed. Last 10 April, the visiting President of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz, lauded *"the considerable progress the Timorese people have achieved in the past 6 years"*, adding that *"the bustling markets, the rebuilt schools, the functioning Government and above all, the peace and stability attest to sensible leadership and sound decisions"*.

East Timor has been living from foreign donor assistance since 2000, but was viewed as a good example for the way funds were spent and for progress in development, despite the fact that the level of unemployment among its one million people hovers around 80%, 40% of which living under the poverty line. 60% of the population is aged 18 and below, many lacking employment and education opportunities. Nevertheless, the economy grew 2,3% in 2005, and the country was about to start using and distributing the profits of its oil resources, following the agreements reached with Australia. The Oil Trust Fund already amounts to \$600 million. The Prime Minister recently announced that the Fund's resources would be applied to combat poverty and underlined that the country was starting its development drive without being burdened by debt. A programme of investments in basic infrastructure and job creation was to be implemented for the first time in 2007, financed by the Oil Trust Fund (€64 million, in a global national budget of €186 million).

East Timor became an ACP member in 2006. On May 19 the EU Commission announced an assistance programme worth €18 million and funded by the FED, focused on poverty reduction through capacity building and rural development.

Conclusion: losing focus too soon from the "success story"

The East Timorese definitely bear the responsibility for the tragedy of the current political and security crisis, whether or not it was fuelled by different sources other than the East Timorese. If there was a plan to destabilize East Timor, the East Timorese actors played their «assigned» roles perfectly.

But the shortcomings of the East Timorese leadership should have been expected and compensated for in contingency planning for the country. The way in which the UN,

and the EU, and Portugal in particular, took for granted the positive way in which the East Timorese «success story» was developing, ended up being naively optimistic and led to premature disengagement and loss of focus.

This crisis shows that in fact the international community withdrew too much and too early from East Timor since 2002. A much more consistent effort was needed to consolidate democratic structures, methods and culture. Investment in the adequate set-up and training of the security forces, police and judiciary was clearly not enough and possibly even misdirected.

Once this crisis is under control, the international community, the EU, the UN and Portugal in particular, should take stock of their own involvement and work out how to correct mistakes and omissions of their own responsibility.

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