

DURING EARLY 2006, a dispute between the government and renegade security force elements in Timor Leste escalated out of control. By late May Australian-led international military intervention was necessary to restore order. With Timor Leste, which became independent in 2002 after 24 years of Indonesian occupation and three years of United Nations tutelage, apparently on the brink of failing as a state, the question now is how a process of national disintegration can be reversed. This question is particularly acute for nearby governments in Southeast Asia and Australia, but is also important for the UN, which invested so much in Timor Leste between 1999 and 2002.

### Security force tensions

In part, the current crisis has its roots in a mutiny by 600 troops from Timor Leste's 1,400-strong defence force (FDTL), who went on strike in February in protest against alleged ill-treatment, notably discrimination in promotions. The mutinous troops subsequently became known as 'the petitioners'. Though ethnic divisions had not previously been prominent in Timor Leste, there was a significant ethnic or at least regional component to this dispute: most of the mutinous troops came from the country's west and complained that they suffered discrimination in a force dominated by officers from the east, reflecting that force's origins in the eastern-based, pre-independence anti-Indonesian armed resistance movement, Falintil. There was also tension between the mainstream eastern-dominated defence force and the better-resourced 3,500-strong police force (PNTL), which was dominated by westerners. Almost 70% of disciplinary cases within the FDTL resulted from confrontations with police personnel, many of whom were recruited from the former local Indonesian police force.

However, opposition within the security forces to the leadership of the then-prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, also contributed to the crisis. Since 2002 Alkatiri, a relatively obscure figure who had spent the 1975-99 period in exile in Angola and Mozambique, has become widely unpopular. While he has considerable support within Fretilin, and achieved a notable policy success in the July 2005 deal with Australia over the apportionment of revenues from the Timor Gap oil and gas fields, his leadership style is widely seen as characterised by arrogance and an unattractive willingness to confront critics such as the Catholic Church. The fact that Alkatiri is also a

# Turmoil in Timor Leste

## Nation-building unravels

Muslim in a predominantly Roman Catholic country has not helped him domestically. His economic nationalism and cultivation of links with China and Cuba, meanwhile, have not endeared him to some Western critics. President Xanana Gusmão, the leading hero of the anti-Indonesian resistance movement, has by contrast retained huge popularity. But his position is essentially representational.

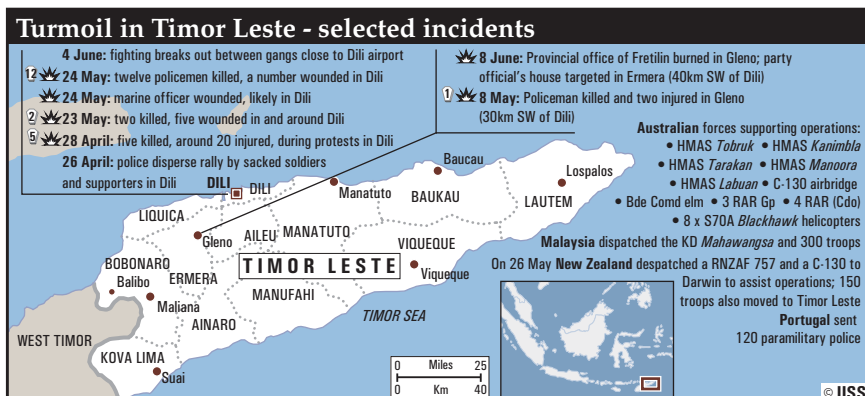
At the same time, large-scale unemployment (estimated at 70% of the labour force) and grinding poverty have fuelled easily exploited discontent amongst urban youths, and a region-based gang culture has developed within these circles. The estimated US\$3 billion in aid received since 1999 has not been used effectively and, in March 2006, a UN report criticised Alkatiri's government for failing to use the revenue Timor Leste is beginning to earn from oil and gas production to start resolving the country's major economic and social problems.

From the time of the previous international military intervention in September 1999 until June 2005, a United Nations peacekeeping contingent (in which Australian troops formed the largest component) provided a reassuring security presence. A UN mission of 120 administrators, police and military advisers remained, but was to be withdrawn on 20 May 2006. In the absence of UN peacekeepers, law and order broke down in early 2006. In March the 600 striking soldiers were dismissed and subsequently fled Dili without their weapons, camping in the hills surrounding the town. In April, defence force troops opened fire on a crowd demonstrating in support of the sacked soldiers, sparking a riot that left at least six dead and led to an exodus of more than 20,000 people from the capital.

While it seemed that Alkatiri and some of his ministers sought to use the defence force for their own political purposes, the rebel troops hoped that Alkatiri would be ousted as secretary-general of the ruling Fretilin party (and hence as prime minister) in an internal election in mid-May. In the event, however, an open show of hands in the 80-member central committee replaced the usual secret ballot, and Alkatiri was re-elected with 97% of the vote. A retired Falintil guerrilla has subsequently claimed that in early May Alkatiri, in collusion with Interior Minister Rogerio Lobato, recruited him to lead a 30-strong 'hit squad' composed of former pro-independence fighters, with the intention of intimidating and even assassinating political opponents.

### International intervention

Following exchanges of gunfire between the rebels (now supported by armed police deserters) and pro-government forces in May, the government asked Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Portugal to intervene militarily in order to disarm the renegades. On 24 May, after national police chief Paulo Martins fled Dili for the hills, defence force troops attacked his headquarters, accusing the police of aligning themselves with the rebels. As UN mediators escorted unarmed policemen from the building, the army opened fire, killing 12 police officers. Subsequently, the army and police largely disintegrated: 70% of the police force deserted, many joining the rebels, while only 400 defence force troops remained loyal to the government. Law and order broke down, with youth gangs loosely allied to the feuding security force factions engaging in widespread fighting and arson attacks. Six relatives of Interior



## Turmoil in Timor Leste page 2

Minister Lobato were killed in one such incident.

The first contingent of almost 200 Australian special forces troops and commandos landed in Dili on 25 May; Malaysia also deployed an advance party. By 27 May, a full battalion group of 1,300 Australian troops was on the ground, supported by helicopters and warships. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan requested Security Council approval for the intervention, but Russia argued that more information was needed before a vote. Nevertheless, 2,200 troops and paramilitary police from the four contributing countries were in East Timor by the end of May. These included more than 300 Malaysian troops (plus additional police), 150 New Zealanders and 120 paramilitary police from Portugal. As his country's troops assumed the main responsibility for restoring order, Australian Prime Minister John Howard blamed Alkatiri's government for Timor Leste's crisis and demanded more effective governance in future.

On 29 May, after meeting Alkatiri and his government for talks, President Gusmão appealed for an end to violence. The following day, the president announced 30 days of emergency rule and – in his formal capacity as military commander-in-chief – took over responsibility for defence and internal security from the respective ministers, Roque Rodriguez and Rogerio Lobato. Meanwhile, the intervention force began disarming the security forces: by 1 June the majority of FDTL troops had handed over their weapons, though PNTL personnel were more reluctant to do so. In mid-June the Australian army secured agreement from the breakaway forces to begin disarming immediately; more than 20 rebel troops surrendered their arms on 17 June.

Looting and arson by alcohol-fuelled gangs continued despite the presence of foreign troops, whose restrictive rules of engagement apparently constrained them from using lethal force to restore order. Despite the deployment of 200 Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers by mid-June, the crime level remained 'significant' according to AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty. The police confiscated more than 500 firearms but 'thousands' remained in private hands. However, the arrival of additional international police, including 250 from Malaysia, was expected to improve the situation.

Though the international force partially restored law and order, the political crisis deepened. On 2 June, the president transferred responsibility for the security forces to Foreign Minister José Ramos-Horta, further isolating the prime minister. But claiming that he still had popular

backing and that his political opponents wanted to establish a 'transitional government' as a way of reducing Fretilin's influence, Alkatiri refused to resign and said he would hold office until the 2007 elections. After former interior minister Lobato was placed under house arrest while his role in arming the alleged 'hit squad' was investigated amidst allegations that the prime minister also had a role in the affair, on 22 June Gusmão threatened to resign unless Alkatiri stepped down. Although a meeting of Fretilin's central committee on 25 June resolved that neither Gusmão nor Alkatiri should resign, but should pursue dialogue to resolve the crisis, Alkatiri's obduracy prompted Ramos-Horta and another minister to resign. On 26 June, Alkatiri finally relinquished power, triggering celebrations in Dili. It seemed likely that either Ramos-Horta or Minister of State Ana Pessoa would replace him.

### Regional responses

Because of its political investment in Timor Leste since 1999, as well as its concern to bolster security in the 'arc of instability' to Australia's north and east, the Howard government in Canberra took the lead in the international intervention. However, the crisis has raised the question about whether the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which aspires to establish an ASEAN Security Community with regional peacekeeping amongst its roles, should be playing a more active part.

Apart from the fact that there is as yet no institutional framework for joint peacekeeping by ASEAN members, most of these members are effectively disqualified from peacekeeping in Timor Leste even on an individual basis. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam have no experience of peacekeeping. Brunei lacks the military or police resources to provide anything more than observers. It would be inappropriate and counterproductive for Indonesia, the former occupying power, to take part in the intervention. Indeed, though pro-Indonesian militias in Timor Leste may have played some part in the violence, Jakarta's hands-off attitude has been conspicuous. In return, Timor Leste's leaders have recognised Indonesia's legitimate interest as a neighbour: in mid-June, Gusmão and Ramos-Horta met Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono on Bali to brief him on the crisis. Thailand and the Philippines are both heavily preoccupied with their own internal security problems. Singapore could provide a small contingent but, because its armed forces rely on conscripts and reservists for the bulk of their

personnel, not at short notice. This leaves Malaysia which, according to Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, intervened for three reasons: out of concern over Timor Leste's potential disintegration; because Alkatiri appealed personally for Malaysian help; and to lend substance to the ASEAN Security Community aspiration.

The challenge for Australia and other members of the ad hoc coalition providing troops and police is to help pull Timor Leste back from the brink of becoming a failed state. The immediate priorities need to be reconstituting the security forces (though not necessarily on the previous scale or organisational pattern), investigating the recent violence, rehousing the 150,000 internally displaced people living in primitive conditions in makeshift settlements as a result of the disturbances, and ensuring a calm and secure environment during the build-up to the 2007 elections. There will also need to be an international effort to assist Timor Leste's government in dealing with underlying problems of poverty and unemployment. In mid-June, Kofi Annan argued that 'the UN will have to go back to Timor Leste in a much larger form'.

While the UN is understandably keen to re-involve itself as fully as possible in Timor Leste given the grievous threat to its previous investment there, the nature of its future role is controversial. Malaysia's UN representative has proposed that the Security Council consider a fully-fledged Peacekeeping Operation for Timor Leste. Ramos-Horta suggested he would ask for Malaysian troops to remain for between two and five years under a UN mandate, with other regional states such as Fiji, Singapore and Thailand possibly contributing peacekeepers. However, Canberra's UN ambassador, Robert Hill, has argued that Australia should lead the multinational military force, with the UN concentrating on the international operation's governance and law-and-order aspects. In early June, speaking at the IISS Asia Security Summit, 'The Shangri-La Dialogue', in Singapore, Australia's Defence Minister Brendan Nelson called for a broader regional coalition to assist Timor Leste, and it emerged that other Asian states such as South Korea might contribute to the international security force. It may be that while Australia leads the military side of the operation for the 6–12 months that Canberra envisages its own major military commitment lasting, the UN will assume control of the remaining peacekeepers beyond that. It is clear, though, that some form of international security presence will be needed in the medium to long term to ensure that Timor Leste does not come off the rails again. 