

Australian troops carry out provocations against East Timor's Fretilin

Richard Phillips
27 August 2007

Australian troops occupying East Timor vandalised and stole Fretilin flags from two villages in the country's eastern districts of Baucau and Viqueque last week. The arrogant and crude provocation is part of the Australian government's ongoing attempts to intimidate opponents of the recent appointment of Xanana Gusmao as East Timorese prime minister.

According to eyewitnesses, soldiers travelling in two Australian military vehicles on August 18 pulled down flags outside Walili, wiped their backsides with them and then drove off with the torn material. At Alala, in the Viqueque district, troops tried to pull a Fretilin flag away from its rope, dragged it onto the road and then drove over it.

Fretilin supporters were flying the flags in protest against the new government, which was appointed on August 6 by East Timorese President Jose Ramos-Horta after obvious prompting from Canberra. Gusmao heads an anti-Fretilin coalition government, despite the fact that Fretilin won 29 percent of the popular vote in the June 30 election and is the largest party bloc in the 65-member parliament.

The flag desecrations were immediately condemned by Fretilin vice president Arsenio Bano and Fretilin president and former prime minister Mari Alkatiri.

Bano correctly noted that the actions were not just carried out by "misguided individual soldiers" but were "another demonstration of the partisan nature of the Howard government's military intervention in East Timor." It reflected, he continued, the "cultural insensitivity and arrogance that typifies Australian military operations in the Pacific region."

Alkatiri said that the Australian troops had been intimidating Fretilin supporters for an extended period. "They [Australian troops] came here to help us solve our problems but they came to give their backing to one

side and fight against the other. They had better return home because they are not neutral," he said.

Alkatiri's claim that the Australian troops had come "to help us solve our problems" is patently false. The Fretilin leader himself was forced to resign as prime minister last year after a dirty tricks campaign orchestrated by Canberra and the Australian media. During his last visit to East Timor in July, Prime Minister John Howard arrogantly declared that Australian troops would remain in the country until there was "stability".

From the outset, Australia's intervention in the poverty stricken country has been a neo-colonial operation aimed at securing the largest share of the oil and gas resources in the Timor Gap, while preventing other regional powers from exercising influence.

Alkatiri's tentative suggestion that the military should "return home"—the first time a Fretilin leader has publicly called for the withdrawal of Australian troops—is a pale reflection of the popular opposition to the open-ended Australian occupation.

Growing numbers of East Timorese people are hostile to Canberra's meddling and its increasingly aggressive ultimatums. The protests that erupted following the appointment of Gusmao as prime minister were another indication of the extent of the anger, which Fretilin has attempted to both contain and use for its own immediate political ends.

When Ramos-Horta announced his appointment of Gusmao to head the government, Fretilin declared the new regime unconstitutional, threatened legal action and called for a parliamentary boycott by its MPs. Alkatiri suggested that "people power" might force Fretilin's inclusion in a new "grand coalition". But when the demonstrations condemning Gusmao and Ramos-Horta as Canberra's puppets threatened to

escalate out of control, the party leadership quickly moved to dissipate the widespread opposition.

After three days of protests and riots, in which scores of people were arrested, and refugee camps in Dili surrounded by Australian troops to prevent the residents from demonstrating, Alkatiri met with Ramos-Horta and Gusmao and pledged to calm the situation. Before the meeting, Ramos-Horta threatened to sack any civil servant who joined anti-government protests.

A week later, the Fretilin leadership dropped its threatened legal action against the government. The party's leading personnel visited villages, telling local leaders that they would be held responsible for any violence. On August 13, Aniceto Lopes, leader of Fretilin's parliamentary group, issued a statement appealing to party members and supporters to "guarantee stability" in the country and announced that MPs were ending their boycott.

As UN spokesperson Allison Cooper told SBS News: "We are very, very relieved and we welcome Fretilin's decision to return into the parliament. They have a very valid and important role as the opposition and the opposition's role in formulating policies and laws that will guide this country over the next five years..."

In other words, the Fretilin leadership is being relied upon to accept the anti-democratic appointment of an Australian-backed puppet regime, become its "loyal" parliamentary opposition, and collaborate with it in the continuing exploitation of the people and resources of East Timor.

Meanwhile, the Howard government's provocations against Fretilin are continuing unabated.

In the eastern districts, Australian troops have reportedly been canvassing villages, telling residents they should stop supporting Fretilin and back the new government. Fernando Soares, a 35-year-old farmer and a well-known Fretilin member in Bucoli, said that at 8 p.m. on August 16, two days before the flag provocation, a group of Australian soldiers accompanied by a Timorese interpreter, came to his home and demanded to know whether he supported Fretilin or the Gusmao government.

When Soares said he supported Fretilin, he was told that he should back the new government and "influence" youth in his area to do the same. Other villagers have reported similar demands by Australian troop patrols over the past year. Fretilin's response to

this bullying has been to call for a Fretilin and United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor (UNMIT) investigation into Australian Defence Force operations.

Notwithstanding their differences with Gusmao and Ramos-Horta, the Fretilin leadership has no program to alleviate the mass poverty that afflicts the East Timorese people. Fretilin's manoeuvres are directed toward demonstrating that it is the most effective political instrument for containing the East Timorese masses while appealing to one or another major power in Europe or Asia to counteract Australian domination.



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