

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BRIEFING PAPERINDONESIA AND PORTUGUESE TIMOR

Portuguese Timor is a small (population 600,000) hitherto neglected Portuguese colony occupying half the island of Timor. The other half is Indonesian territory. The inhabitants of the two halves are ethnically indistinguishable, although centuries under separate rule have created social and cultural differences. Indonesia does not claim the colony, and the Suharto government has been content to leave it indefinitely in Portuguese hands. The GOI does, however, look with concern at the idea of an independent Portuguese Timor, fearing that its backwardness and lack of economic viability would open it to pervasive outside -- especially Chinese -- influence which could spread into Indonesia.

Background

A small scale civil war broke out between rival political parties in Portuguese Timor last August. Unable to restore order, the Portuguese evacuated their remaining citizens and moved their administration to a small off-shore island. Fretilin, a vaguely leftist party favoring early independence, quickly gained ascendancy when it won the support (and the weapons) of the 2,000-odd Timorese soldiers from the disbanded Portuguese garrison. The Indonesians, however, have trained and equipped units from the two main rival parties and sent them back into Portuguese Timor with a stiffening of disguised Indonesian special forces troops. The latter have been pressing Fretilin back toward Dili, the capital. Latest reports indicate that hostilities have decreased while the pro-Indonesian forces consolidate their position.

Meanwhile, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, meeting recently in Rome with his Portuguese counterpart, obtained the latter's agreement to a statement reasserting Portugal's responsibility for the territory and calling for a conference between the Timorese parties and the Portuguese to end the fighting and resume the "orderly" process of decolonization disrupted last August. The statement favors Indonesia, in that it refutes Fretilin's claim to control of the territory and has Fretilin outnumbered in a conference by the two rival parties now under de facto Indonesian control.

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Current Situation

Preoccupied with the crisis at home and with their focus on colonial problems limited to agonizing over Angola, Portugal's chief interest is to get out gracefully, leaving behind a semblance of order on which legal factions can agree. The Portuguese have called a conference of the three main Timorese parties, suggesting Darwin as the site. None of the three parties have rejected the proposal, but there is disagreement and bickering over the location.

Meanwhile, the Indonesian UN Mission has circulated a policy statement emphasizing Portugal's continuing responsibility for "orderly decolonization" of Timor, calling for an act of self-determination by the "entire people", pledging to abide by the outcome, and welcoming them to "become independent through integration with Indonesia" if they wish. In a passage aimed at Fretilin, the statement declared that "Indonesia cannot accept a solution imposed by any party through armed force".

Prognosis

A Portuguese sponsored conference of the three main Timorese parties (assuming it is eventually held) could result in a cease-fire call and perhaps a token return of the Portuguese administration to Dili, although an actual restoration of Portuguese authority seems most unlikely. Although the Indonesians would probably give a cease-fire their public blessing, we expect that they will keep up their clandestine pressure on Fretilin until the party is defeated or breaks up. The GOI has displayed patience and some subtlety in its efforts to date, however, and will try to reach its objective with minimum outside impact.

U.S. Interest

We have taken the position that the U.S. should eschew involvement in the Timor situation and leave its resolution to the Indonesians, Portuguese, Australians and Timorese themselves. There are no present calls for our involvement, with the parties concerned in direct touch with each other and none seeking our help.

A particular concern for us has been the possibility of an overt Indonesian military move into the territory, inevitably using US-supplied weapons in the process. We have brought the matter quietly to the attention of the Indonesian leaders, however, and this has been a major factor in restraining Jakarta to date.

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