

Jonathan Steele, a senior foreign correspondent with The Guardian (London), spent a month in East Timor this spring as a consultant to the United Nations Transitional Administration. This article reflects his views, and not those of the United Nations.



Nation Building in East Timor

Jonathan Steele

In the new world disorder of the post–Cold War period, United Nations peacekeeping has moved far beyond the patrolling of cease-fire lines to encompass a wide range of administrative, humanitarian, and reconstruction tasks within shattered countries. Lakhdar Brahimi, a former Algerian foreign minister with long experience in the U.N. system, who was asked by Kofi Annan in 2000 to prepare a report on reforming peacekeeping, has called these “peace-building” tasks.

In the case of East Timor, the Security Council devised a unique mandate. For the first time in history, it took total control of a country, with all executive, legislative, judicial, and even military power vested in its appointed administrator, who ran everything from the power stations and fire departments to radio, television, and a U.N. newspaper. So when Kofi Annan watched the blue U.N. flag come down over Dili, East Timor’s capital, at midnight this past May 19, the tropical air hung heavy with colonial antecedents. The secretary general was not just a VIP at someone else’s independence party. He was an imperial sovereign handing over the reins of power.

The mission he closed was the shortest, least bloody, most benevolent, and possibly most successful colonization since the Middle Ages. But, in carrying out its mandate, UNTAET made mistakes from which future U.N. missions would do well to learn.

UNTAET’s very name—United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor—conceded that this was no proud empire on which the sun would never set. U.N.

Resolution 1272 of October 25, 1999, which authorized the mission, did not mention an exit date, but U.N. members foresaw a timeframe of two, perhaps three, years.

In early September 1999, Indonesia had agreed to withdraw from East Timor and allow an Australian-led peace force to enter the territory to guarantee security. UNTAET was to take over command from the Australians and create a civil administration to run the country until independence.

The Security Council had authorized a large, though less comprehensive and dominant, U.N. administration for Kosovo only four months earlier. The timetable for the Kosovo mission was open, since none of the five permanent members of the council could stomach the goal of independence for the territory, even though its Albanian majority ardently wanted it. East Timor was different. The council’s objective was clear, the timeframe was to be limited, and although the Bush administration was not yet in existence, nation building was already frowned on by major states. UNTAET would be Quickfixville.

East Timor is half of a small mountainous tropical island in the Indonesian archipelago, about 400 miles north of Australia. First settled by the Portuguese in the seventeenth century, the island was divided in 1859, with Portugal taking the eastern half and the Dutch the western. While the Dutch pulled out soon after the Second World War, leaving West Timor to Indonesia, the Portuguese remained in the east. After centuries of Portuguese rule, the

700,000 people of East Timor, though ethnically similar, were distinguished from the West Timorese by their strong Catholicism and their use of the Portuguese language.

With the overthrow of fascism in Portugal in 1974 by the Armed Forces' Movement, East Timor's independence became an issue. The political party of the elite, the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), preferred federation with Portugal, while Fretilin (the Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor) was a typical Third World liberation movement with a vaguely socialist orientation. As the Indonesians watched covetously from the wings, the UDT launched an armed coup in August 1975 to try to destroy Fretilin. But the UDT had little popular support. Fretilin and its hastily formed army, Falintil, defeated the UDT, whose members fled to West Timor. The Portuguese administration hurried from the capital, Dili, to the island of Atauro, and Portugal made it clear it would no longer rule the colony.

The UDT looked to Indonesia to help it gain control, and Indonesian troops and the UDT mounted several incursions in October and November 1975. On November 28, Fretilin declared independence and appealed for international support. But its socialist rhetoric worried the United States, Australia, and other Western governments. Smarting from defeat in Vietnam, President Gerald Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, did not want a new left-wing "threat" to emerge in Southeast Asia.

Indonesia stepped up preparations for a full-scale invasion of East Timor. U.S. intelligence knew what was happening, and before a visit to Jakarta by Ford in December 1975, according to newly published official documents (see www.etan.org), Kissinger prepared talking points saying the "merger" of East Timor with Indonesia was "a reasonable solution." In Jakarta, the Indonesian dictator, General Suharto, discussed his intentions with Ford, who told him, "We understand and will not press you on the

issue." Kissinger's only worries were that he and Ford get out of the country before any invasion. "If you have made plans, we will do our best to keep quiet until the president returns home," Kissinger told Suharto.

Indonesia duly invaded two days later. Although the United States withheld official recognition of the annexation (only Australia recognized it), Washington maintained close ties with the Suharto regime until its fall in 1998. Falintil mounted a guerrilla war, but the civilian population took terrible losses at the hands of the Indonesian occupiers. Indonesia routinely denied visas to journalists and human rights monitors to visit the island. East Timorese leaders, including the current foreign minister, Dr. José Ramos-Horta, and the bishop of Dili, Carlos Ximenes Belo (who jointly shared the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize), helped keep the issue alive at the United Nations—which regularly condemned Indonesia's occupation—but the United States did nothing to try to end it.

After Suharto's fall, his successor, B. J. Habibie, offered to let the United Nations organize a referendum in East Timor on independence or autonomy within Indonesia. Indonesian military leaders were unhappy. They paid local Timorese to join armed militias to work with the army in support of the pro-autonomy side. In a ruthless campaign of violence and intimidation, they first tried to influence the result of the U.N. referendum and then launched a frenzy of terrorism when voters chose freedom. In five months of wanton destruction in 1999, troops and militias looted and torched tens of thousands of private homes and public buildings, smashing electricity generators and sabotaging or stealing equipment. Eighty-five percent of the country's schools and three-quarters of its health infrastructure were destroyed.

A quarter of a million Timorese fled across the border to the Indonesian province of West Timor. Some were members of the militias who feared the wrath of their East

Timorese victims once U.N. peace forces arrived, but most were ordinary villagers from East Timor, who were forcibly deported on trucks or ships by the fleeing militias. Almost the entire remaining population of East Timor fled to the hills. Several hundred who decided to take shelter in churches or in the Roman Catholic bishop's compound in Dili were killed. Even today, the number of unreconstructed buildings is formidable. At Manatuto, east of Dili on the northern coast, translucent blue-green water washes across coral to a beach where every building on the seafront is roofless, doors and windows burned to ash. In Maliana, near the border with West Timor, the police station where dozens vainly sought protection from the militias is a silent shell, and the only sign of new construction is a memorial to the dead of Black September.

In Dili, you can push your way past banana fronds and head-high cassava plants and find blocks of ruins hidden from the road. "We had no alternative but to plant here," Rosantina Leal explained with visible embarrassment when I came upon her in the Indonesian military cemetery in Dili. In the ground behind the rows of soldier's graves, she and several dozen other people had sown corn and cassava. We crouched through a hole in the cemetery's back wall and found ourselves in a small settlement of wrecked houses. Some were still empty. In others, villagers had put up palm-leaf thatch where corrugated iron once lay across wooden timbers. "We have great respect for the Indonesian graves and don't touch them, but we have no jobs and no money to build a new roof. We have to survive somehow," Leal said. In September 1999, her husband and their four older children escaped into the hills. Pregnant, she took shelter in a Catholic seminary before militias burned her home and those of her neighbors.

A Destroyed Country

Restoring security in this destroyed country was the top priority for Sergio Vieira de

Mello, the patient but forceful U.N. diplomat from Brazil who was plucked from heading the mission in Kosovo to become the transitional administrator and de facto governor of East Timor. People needed to feel safe enough to come home. Angry militias, sheltering in West Timor, were not yet ready to admit defeat, and troops from Australia and New Zealand fanned out to the border regions in East Timor to block infiltration. De Mello chose a strategy of tough military action, insisting on strengthening the traditional U.N. rules of engagement so as to allow soldiers to shoot armed and uniformed strangers at the first hint of hostile intent.

This firm policy undoubtedly helped to convince the Indonesian government to rein in the remnants of the militias by 2001 and allow the refugees to go home. For the last year, there have been no organized cross-border incursions. By independence day, over 80 percent of the 250,000 refugees were home. But the Australian and New Zealand battalions are taking no chances. They remain at full strength along the border, which allows scores of soldiers to take part in civil construction projects, like rebuilding schools and putting in water pumps when they are not on patrol. They are due to stay along the border under U.N. control for another two years while the new East Timor Defense Force gradually assumes responsibility for the rest of the country.

A U.N. police force had executive authority to make arrests, as in Kosovo. This was vital in capturing former militia members who tried to go back to their villages as returning refugees.

Sergio de Mello's security strategy of tough measures under exclusive international control was coupled with gradual steps to involve the East Timorese in political decisionmaking. It was not easy. Lakhdar Brahimi was one U.N. veteran who believed the United Nations should have created a provisional government of Timorese and al-

lowed itself only a symbolic supervisory role once Indonesia ended its occupation.

Timorese leaders were less radical but they did want power sharing. In mid-October 1999, they gave Ian Martin, the leader of UNAMET, the mission which had organized the August 1999 referendum, a detailed proposal for a mixed Timorese-U.N. administration. The U.N. department of peacekeeping never put it to the Security Council, according to José Ramos-Horta, now East Timor's foreign minister, who lobbied tirelessly and successfully in foreign capitals for two decades to prevent Indonesia's occupation of East Timor from being endorsed internationally. Instead, the Security Council passed Resolution 1272 giving UNTAET total control. "This was unwise," says Ramos-Horta. "There were East Timorese leaders with obvious standing, legitimacy, and name recognition."

When de Mello arrived in Dili in November 1999, he found a level of destruction far worse than what he had seen in Kosovo. The country had few secondary school teachers (the 80 percent who were Indonesian left in 1999), no civil service, almost no doctors, and an adult population that was 46 percent illiterate. But East Timor had one inestimable benefit, unique to countries scourged by modern war. Land mines were never used.

Although Timorese leaders initially felt UNTAET was excluding them from any share in power, the political environment was better than in Kosovo. While many Timorese had supported the option of autonomy within Indonesia rather than independence, public hatred toward these losers was surprisingly low. There was nothing to match the vicious Albanian reprisals against the Serbs who remained in Kosovo after Yugoslav forces withdrew. Even today, Indonesian statues, monuments, and signs remain unvandalized in towns and villages throughout East Timor. People distinguish between the Indonesian military, whom they hate, and Indonesia, which they respect. Most of the

younger generation speaks Indonesian. Several key student leaders were studying in Jakarta at the time of the mass protests that brought down Suharto in May 1998. They came home and started their own "Timor Spring," traveling round the country to hold "popular consultations" and putting independence openly on the agenda.

For de Mello, East Timor also had the supreme advantage, unlike Kosovo, of a population that was in total support of UNTAET's objective—independence for the territory. "We were given Mission Possible," says Peter Galbraith, a former U.S. ambassador to Croatia, who was in charge of political affairs in UNTAET from January 2000 until the summer of 2001. "The mission was completely congruent with people's wishes. We had adequate security resources. No countries opposed Timorese independence, including Indonesia. There was no equivalent of Serbia. The Timorese had good leaders and Sergio's diplomacy was superb."

Patriating Power from New York to Dili

De Mello's main problem was to square his all-powerful role with the need to transfer authority to a Timorese leadership that did not like Resolution 1272. His mandate was double-edged, to run the government while also transferring power to the Timorese. The question was how, and how fast. He created the 15-member National Consultative Council (NCC), but Timorese leaders complained they had no real power. "The Timorese thought they had little choice but to ratify whatever was put in front of them. They were essentially told 'If you don't do this, there'll be dire consequences with no money to follow,'" Galbraith recalls. The nongovernmental sector complained that it was not consulted at all.

In July 2000, UNTAET replaced the NCC with the 33-member National Council, which included representatives of civil society and the churches. There was also a mixed cabinet, with four Timorese ministers in charge of internal administration,

infrastructure, and economic and social affairs, while four foreigners had finance, justice, police, and political affairs. "The mixed cabinet was crucial in patriating power from New York to Dili. Under the earlier system, regulations were drafted by a legal adviser here and reviewed at U.N. headquarters. With the cabinet and Timorese ministers, New York was much more reluctant to change things," Galbraith says. Though unelected, the National Council served as a kind of legislature, and the system gave cabinet ministers experience in answering questions at public hearings and preparing briefs with policy options and recommendations for colleagues. It also diverted flak from UNTAET by putting Timorese in charge of departments with large staffs or responsibility for utilities, like water, electricity, and transport.

The next step was elections. In August 2001, Timorese voters chose an 88-member Constituent Assembly that was to become the legislature after independence. In April of this year, the Timorese elected José Alexandre Gusmão, known as Xanana, the charismatic former leader of Falintil, the guerrilla army, as president.

While building these institutions, UNTAET ran into an intense power struggle among the Timorese. Gusmão and the leaders of Fretilin, the main pro-independence movement, had become rivals. Few foreign governments resist the tendency to prefer a single interlocutor in their diplomatic dealings, and critics claim de Mello exacerbated intra-Timorese arguments by making Gusmão his favored partner. But the competition was inevitable. Fretilin knew Gusmão's popularity as leader of the guerrilla army was unchallengeable. They saw the Constituent Assembly as their chance to exert supremacy and worked hard in the countryside to garner support. They won 55 of the 88 seats and drafted a constitution—to UNTAET's barely concealed discomfort—that gave the president only limited powers.

On two key issues UNTAET abdicated responsibility. It allowed Gusmão, this time backed by Fretilin, to have Portuguese constitutionally established as an official language alongside Tetum, the local lingua franca, even though only 5 percent of Timorese and virtually no young people speak it. The decision has caused chaos in the schools since most teachers are unable to speak Portuguese.

UNTAET also left it to the independent government to resolve land ownership questions. Claims over who was given what during Portuguese and Indonesian rule, and whether abandoned buildings could be taken over by new residents, would keep the courts busy for years—if there were any courts.

Justice Delayed

One morning, I visited Dili's appeals court, not far from the central market. The building had been pressed into use for a trial of three Timorese former militia members on charges of crimes against humanity in 1999. As well as rape and murder, the alleged offenses included nauseating forms of torture in which the defendants on one occasion cut off a man's ear and forced him to eat it.

The three accused were brought in right past the witness bench, within striking distance of an elderly couple who were nervously waiting to give evidence for the prosecution. The foreign U.N.-appointed judge's English was translated into Tetum, with Indonesian and Portuguese also available—a process that caused constant delays. The trial had been dragging on for three months already. It was the second of ten priority cases that the General Prosecutor's Serious Crimes Unit is planning to bring to court by mid-2003. The unit, which has been tasked to investigate mass killings, deportations, torture, rapes, and other crimes against humanity committed in 1999 will be lucky to meet its target. On the day I was there, the case was adjourned after 15

minutes because one of the men's defense lawyers was absent.

Shortages of court staff are only the latest in a series of problems that have plagued the unit. There were management clashes among the international staff in the early months. Some investigators were reluctant to leave the comparative comfort of Dili to go to any of the 13 districts to interview witnesses. U.N. police were drafted to help them but were never put under the unit's authority, so that when some got bored they just walked out and returned to their police duties. Prosecutors and investigators clashed over who was in charge of deciding which cases should take priority.

Last year, de Mello brought in Dennis McNamara, an expert on human rights and humanitarian issues with a long career in the U.N. system, to use his friendly and cajoling style to sort out the management mess. But funds for the prosecutor's office and the Ministry of Justice remained low, and there were not enough investigators available even to follow up on all reports of mass graves and exhume bodies. Timorese lawyers could not be trained quickly enough to take all cases to court, once evidence was ready, and foreign judges did not stay long. With only three in the country when UNTAET prepared to leave Dili in May, this meant only one panel could sit since under UNTAET regulations two foreign judges were needed in every case. Meanwhile, the cases piled up, and most of the accused remained in jail pending trial (some had been in jail for two years already). When some were released on bail, distressed victims wondered why perpetrators were living free.

Xanana Gusmão upset many in UNTAET by repeatedly calling for amnesty for members of the militias: "The destruction that happened in East Timor was not by the militias' own initiative. If we look at justice in a very formal way in terms of trial, punishment, and prison, maybe we don't solve the situation," he said last autumn. "Are we able to put hundreds of militias into jail and

feed them.... What is the priority? To bring people to prison and feed them when our people are demanding health care and education for their children?"

Timorese victims who otherwise adored Xanana did not agree. "I am worried about amnesty talk and so are we all. I agree with reconciliation and having people come back here from West Timor, but we don't want amnesty because otherwise we'll become victims a second time," Domingues Verdial told me as we sat on the porch of a modest home in Maliana, the scene of some of the worst crimes of September 1999. Her husband and three brothers were killed. She and several other widows have formed a group to press for early trials, not just for justice but also, they hope, to find out where their loved ones' bodies are.

The United States and other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council who might have furthered the cause of justice by putting pressure on Indonesia to arrest and send to East Timor the dozens of militia who have been indicted for crimes against humanity and are living in Indonesia have not done so. Indonesia is also dragging its feet on the Ad Hoc Human Rights Court, set up under exclusive Indonesian jurisdiction in March 2001 to try military and police officers accused of ordering, or taking part in, the repression of 1999. East Timor's leaders need good relations with their neighbor, so they soft-pedal Indonesia's delaying tactics. "Most Western powers have been hesitant and ambiguous about human rights in Indonesia. They posture a lot but it's not really credible. They don't mean it. Even U.N. headquarters in New York is not sure whether it wants a tough line with Indonesia," a senior UNTAET official said.

A Neglected Asset

A few yards from Sergio de Mello's office on the second floor of the old Portuguese administrative building on Dili's seafont a glass door was marked with the words "Office of the Timor Sea." Inside it sat

two bright but understandably harassed young lawyers from Australia and Canada. Compared with the seven people dealing with political affairs in another office on the same corridor, these two were overworked and had few resources. Yet they were responsible for the most important aspect of the territory's economy, the oil and gas reserves that lie beneath the sea between East Timor and Australia.

Why were so few people employed to handle an asset that could bring East Timor up to \$3 billion over the estimated 17-year life of the main gas and oil field, once it starts producing in three years' time? (East Timor's current annual budget is around \$70 million.) Why did UNTAET not set up a separate ministry of energy, and help its successor, the East Timorese government, to do likewise? Why was there not even one specialist on oil, or energy law on the list of top 100 posts for international staff being recruited as advisers for the Timorese government after independence?

I found no U.N. officials able to answer these questions, and some appeared not to have noticed the anomaly. Is it a result of the ideology of small-government-is-best government that has become the international orthodoxy? Or is the United Nations collectively, from New York headquarters down to the field, locked into a patronizing mindset in which the countries it helps are, by definition, assumed to be beggars at the gate? Bosnia, Kosovo, and other countries that recently had or still have U.N. administrations, possess minimal natural resources. Not so East Timor. Thanks to oil and gas, it has a real chance to avoid the traps of foreign debt and long-term donor dependency that oppress so many other nations.

UNTAET in Dili was well aware, of course, that the country had energy reserves ready to be exploited in the Timor Sea. One of the first decisions it had to make was whether to maintain the existing energy-sharing treaty between Australia and Indonesia or negotiate a new one with Aus-

tralia on East Timor's behalf. It chose the second course. Indonesia had made major concessions in demarcating the maritime boundary with Australia in return for Canberra's continued support for Indonesia's occupation of East Timor.

"There was no precedent for the U.N. sitting as a government across the table from another government," de Mello told me. He nominated Peter Galbraith to lead the negotiations with Australia. "Sergio wanted this aggressive and obnoxious American to stand up to the Australians," Galbraith recalled over dinner one evening in Dili this spring. Earlier in the day, in testimony before East Timor's Constituent Assembly, he had reported that the Australians had protested to key U.N. members and tried to have him fired. Other powerful governments also put pressure on UNTAET to soften its line.

Galbraith negotiated hard, hiring several foreign experts as short-term consultants to help his small team. He is convinced the deal they brokered is the best that any negotiators could have achieved under the circumstances. But it seems reasonable to say that the highly complex yet economically vital energy sector in UNTAET should never have been so understaffed. Shortly before independence, while the fledgling East Timor government was discussing whether to sign the new treaty, three unexpected problems emerged. Australia withdrew from the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice on maritime border questions, making it hard for East Timor to seek a favorable legal judgement on future claims. Australia also raised new objections to the treaty itself. Finally, a company that claimed to have rights to the oil from earlier negotiations warned the Timorese that Galbraith's deal could weaken East Timor's case for an eventual change in its maritime boundaries.

While other oil nations have large governmental departments to help them deal with some of the world's most powerful transnational corporations, tiny East Timor

was left to navigate with only minimal expertise and resources to hand. Officials had no chance to seek alternative advice on the merits of possible deals. The funding shortfall was so acute that on the eve of independence UNTAET staff approached Woodside Petroleum, a company with which East Timor was locked in negotiations, to ask it to pay the government's legal fees, albeit on an arms-length and no-conditions-attached basis.

Handcuffing U.N. Missions

The underfunding of the energy team was symptomatic of a wider problem with U.N. missions, of which UNTAET is only one example. Their mandates tend to focus on security, governance, and humanitarian issues, and to underplay economic and social development, even though public security and the sustainability of government itself depend on minimizing the resentment that often flows from misery. Gangs of unemployed youths were already congregating menacingly in Dili and other towns as independence day drew near.

Some 41 percent of East Timor's 800,000 people live under the poverty line of 55 U.S. cents a day. The country's per capita income of \$337 puts it in last place on a list of 162 countries ranked by GDP, according to the U.N. Development Program's first human development report for East Timor. Yet under the General Assembly's "assessed budget" for UNTAET, the mission was not permitted to finance health, education, or other public services. "The money can only be spent on ourselves," de Mello told me. At roughly \$600 million a year, the assessed budget covered everything from peacekeeping forces and a helicopter fleet for U.N. use to international civilian staff salaries and the 29,000 bottles of imported Indonesian water the mission consumed every day.

Foreign governments financed the East Timorese government's budget (annually around \$70 million) and a World Bank-

administered trust fund to finance specific development project (the total received since 1999 is approximately \$150 million). Foreign governments gave bilateral grants worth \$191 million between 1999 and 2001. At the top of the list in spending were Portugal, Japan, the United States, the European Union, and Australia, followed by 19 other countries. But money pledged by donors is always slow in arriving and de Mello was forced to use tough language to the Security Council in November 2000. It is "frankly absurd to preside over a mission that spends ten assessed dollars on itself for every voluntary dollar spent administering the country," he said.

By the time of UNTAET's departure, he had won a little more flexibility from the U.N. system. "They understood I could not be given executive, legislative, and judicial authority and then not be able to spend one cent on rebuilding the electricity system, creating border controls, setting up police stations and prisons. They gradually realized the absurd nature of a mandate that lacked immediate means as part of the assessed budget while we waited for donors to fulfill their pledges," he told me.

Peace-building missions should be more generously and quickly funded from the start; they should not have to rely on donor conferences where governments often play to the gallery in making promises they fail to fulfill.

Every U.N. mission is plagued by a daily sense of financial and social apartheid between expatriate officials and local people. In East Timor, the "bubble economy," or "double economy," was particularly visible because of the size of the UNTAET mission (its staff of 10,000, including troops and police, was about 1.2 percent of East Timor's population) in such a small country and the poverty of the local economy. Timorese constantly complained about the wealth gap, symbolized by the fleets of white Land Cruisers and black Land Rovers trundling round Dili, a city where there

are few private cars. New grumbling greeted UNTAET's contract to purchase less sturdy and less comfortable four-wheel-drive vehicles from the Tata company in India for the use of Timorese officials, especially when it emerged that, after the cost of flying them in by Antonov aircraft, UNTAET was paying more than if it had accepted a rival tender to bring in Land Rovers from Japan.

U.N. missions always have a high share of incompetence, partly because of the speed with which they have to be set up. Individual members come from a variety of nations and take time to gel. And UNTAET had to run a government, which meant providing more than the standard peacekeeping package of improving human rights, organizing refugee returns, and conducting elections. "I got a bunch of generalists," de Mello complained. It was partly as a result of the UNTAET mess that Brahimi proposed that member governments help the U.N. Secretariat compile an Internet-based roster of candidates for civilian posts. They would be medically vetted and interviewed, and ready to go at a few days' notice as new U.N. missions arise.

UNTAET was obliged to stumble on with high staff turnover and a sizable number of people who were not qualified for their jobs. Although staff contracts are normally only for six months, which should make it easy to bid farewell to nonperformers, U.N. mission culture dictates that they are renewed virtually automatically if people want to stay on. The few who are threatened with nonrenewal have rights of appeal and fight desperately hard, especially staff from developing countries, who may be earning three times more than they get at home and are putting children through college or feeding an entire extended family on their U.N. salary.

A "Them" and "Us" Culture

In East Timor, there were two additional problems. Many international staff did not understand the history of the country, and

what they knew centered on the all-too-visible destruction of 1999. This often led them to patronize people without understanding how proud Timorese are of the courage, tenacity, and social mobilization of the guerrilla years, when far more people died than in 1999. The armed combatants of Falintil had relied on a huge network of "clandestinos" in East Timor's towns and villages who defied Indonesian repression and supplied food, shelter, intelligence, and logistical support. "Some internationals saw the Timorese as victims when we felt we were victors," I was told by Foreign Minister Ramos-Horta.

Complaints about a "them" and "us" culture in U.N. missions are commonplace, but as new U.N. peace-building operations continue to be mounted, the need for U.N. headquarters to address the problem becomes more urgent. International staff ought to attend compulsory orientation lectures on the history, politics, and local economies of the countries to which they are being sent. Advice on injections, climate, and demography is not sufficient. In East Timor, whose main language, Tetum, is very easy to pronounce and learn, a few hours of instruction in basic phrases ought to have been mandatory for foreign staff. The ability to say even a couple of words in the local language is a mark of respect. De Mello, a skilled linguist, inserted occasional Tetum sentences into his speeches. A few other internationals made a similar effort, but they were the exceptions.

The other special feature in East Timor was UNTAET's requirement to train Timorese to run the government. De Mello's policy of gradually shifting power to Timorese ministers was not copied with much success at the middle and lower levels of the bureaucracy.

The Drawdown of Assets

One morning this past April, a man from UNTAET walked unannounced into a meeting of Timorese officials in the district adminis-

tration building in Viqueque, a remote town in southeastern Timor. He put a sticker on the computer and left as silently as he had come. There was relief all round. Like a mark on the door in biblical times, the sticker meant that the computer would be spared. It would not be going back to Dili. Other Timorese officials were not so lucky. Long wooden boxes stood in the hall ready to be packed with the computers and printers that would be leaving as UNTAET departed. Cars, phone lines, and even chairs were due to disappear.

The U.N. mission's policy on local government had always been controversial. UNTAET appointed internationals as district administrators and, after deciding against local elections, appointed Timorese to take their place. It initially opposed a World Bank "community empowerment project" to organize village elections, with a 50-50 slate of men and women, to decide what small-scale development schemes to propose for funding. The project had its faults. It bypassed respected traditional leaders and often meant schemes were chosen without coordinating with district administrators, resulting in duplication and resentment. Above all, UNTAET kept tight control in the center, forcing even the international staff in the districts to clear most of their decisions with headquarters in Dili. In a mountainous country with poor roads, this often meant hours of travel to the capital for meetings.

De Mello defended the policy on the grounds that Timorese leaders supported it and that in any case there was neither the money nor the human resources to staff a second tier of government. He also feared "KKN," the initials for the Indonesian words for "corruption, collusion, and nepotism," which would be harder to control if the localities were to gain power. But as some U.N. officials pointed out, centralization only fed into Fretilin's resistance-dictated guerrilla mentality of tight control. The United Nations should have encouraged more participatory decision-making rather

than letting its own centralizing tendencies merge so easily with the Timorese leadership's wartime instincts.

With independence approaching, the drawdown of assets was becoming a nightmare. In every district, electricity was a major problem. Almost three years after the Indonesians sabotaged virtually every diesel-fueled town generator, power supplies were still erratic. UNTAET had decided to repair some generators, but not to replace any. In Viqueque, where power is strictly rationed to a few hours in the evening, Romualdo Soares, the region's electricity officer, complained he had been given no training: "It's better under UNTAET than the Indonesians. When we reported major problems, the Indonesians came from Dili or Surabaya. Now we have technicians from Australia, and they come more quickly, but what will we do when they go?"

The U.N. mission would also be taking its communications system with it when it left the country, even though the inter-urban phone system that the Indonesians sabotaged when they left had not been fixed. The United Nations promised to leave six lines in the headquarters of each of the administrators of the 13 districts. Unless ordinary Timorese had special relations with friends in these headquarters, they would have no way to talk to people in other parts of the country.

UNTAET officials argued that the Timorese government could not afford to maintain the equipment that the mission had brought with it. "This is the most generous handover in U.N. history," Dennis McNamara said. UNTAET valued the assets that would remain at \$8.5 million, about 10 percent of the total. Later, after the government complained, the number of chairs, computers, cars, and generators was revised upward. De Mello had a major public relations challenge on its hands in explaining the drawdown of assets to a critical Timorese public, but he was having a hard job doing it. The generators powering UNTAET radio in several

districts had already been taken back to Dili, and officials were “rushing round like fire-fighters trying to get them back so we could broadcast the reasons for the withdrawal,” one UNTAET official recalls.

East Timor’s economy grew annually during the UNTAET period, thanks to international funding. In 2001, it rose 18 percent, but as Kofi Annan told the Security Council in April this year, the economy “is expected to level out in 2002.” Because of the U.N. mission’s downsizing. It will be three years before oil and gas revenues produce a new upsurge. Avoiding the negative political and psychological effects of UNTAET’s withdrawal from East Timor would still be possible if the outside world would raise the levels of foreign aid so as to maintain economic growth for three more years. The prime responsibility lies with donor governments. Blaming the United Nations is easy, but it is donor governments that control how much or little is spent.

The United Nations Can Do the Job

East Timor’s new government started life on May 20 with several advantages over other territories that have been under some form of U.N. supervision or trusteeship. Although the country has several political parties, the elite is broadly united and no significant group feels marginalized or tempted to start a civil war. There are no rival armies that have to be disarmed and demobilized. The country can look forward to several years of revenue from oil and gas. On the international front, all leading groups, including the military in the former occupying power, Indonesia, accept East Timor’s independent status. Despite the bloodshed under Indonesian rule, Xanana Gusmão, the Timorese president, paid great attention to President Megawati Sukarnoputri at the independence celebrations, even arriving on the platform together with her.

The United Nations can feel proud of its first effort at peace building with an all-inclusive mandate. UNTAET succeeded ad-

mirably in the primary part of its mission, protecting East Timor from reprisals by the militias and providing an environment for most refugees, one-third of the population, to come home. Working with the Timorese leadership, it created a sound foundation for a modern system of democratic government, at least at the central level. It began, if slowly, to prosecute some of those responsible for the 1999 repression. It kept the international community focused on East Timor, maintaining a reasonable flow of donor funding. Where there were problems, they arose from inadequacies in UNTAET’s internal management, insufficient attention to training Timorese, a tendency to highlight institution building too far above social and economic development, and the comparative neglect of the energy sector as the central platform for the country’s economy. The style of UNTAET’s operations and the insensitive behavior of many of its staff prompted justifiable complaints from local people.

But the blemishes pale beside the overall record of success, and the United Nations can justifiably claim that, if it is given support by the Security Council’s member governments, it has the tools and the experience to take on other nation-building tasks in the future.

In a postcolonial era, candidates for U.N. trusteeship may seem few and far between. But new challenges arise unexpectedly. A year ago, a U.N. mission in Afghanistan would have seemed improbable, especially as the Bush administration insisted nation building was not on Washington’s agenda. Now there is a U.N. mission in Kabul, and the case is strong for it to be extended throughout the country, with an international troop presence to go alongside it, preferably, under U.N. command.

In recent years, the United States and other major powers have been reluctant to cede control of their security forces in peace-keeping operations. In Bosnia, since the Dayton Accords, in Kosovo, and in Afghanistan troop-contributing countries insisted

on keeping leadership in the hands of a single nation. UNTAET's success shows that peace forces under U.N. command are not doomed to be ineffective or incoherent. UNPROFOR in Bosnia in the early 1990s is often cited as a mission not to be repeated, but UNPROFOR's problem was not that the United Nations was in charge, but that the force's mandate to act impartially in the midst of a war was misconceived by the governments that ordered it. When they added the task of protecting safe havens

like Srebrenica without supplying adequate troop strength, they compounded the problem.

It is possible to envisage eventual UNTAET-style missions in the Western Sahara and Kashmir. While it remains to be seen whether the situation in these places will evolve to the point where the Security Council can authorize such missions, East Timor has shown that the United Nations is up to the job. ●

**To subscribe to WORLD POLICY JOURNAL,
or for billing inquiries, back issues (\$10), and claims:**

tel: 1-800-877-2693, ext.123

email: wpjsubscriptions@boydprinting.com

website: www.worldpolicy.org

For reprints (\$5), permissions, or editorial inquiries:

tel: (212) 229-5808, ext.105

fax: (212) 807-1294

email: wpj@newschool.edu

Editorial Offices

World Policy Journal
New School University
66 Fifth Avenue, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10011

Circulation Offices

World Policy Journal
Q Corporation
49 Sheridan Avenue
Albany, NY 12210

Advertising

Janet Kleinman
Kalish, Quigley & Rosen
tel: (212) 399-9500 ext.13
jkleinman@kqandr.com