

Youth and the struggle for freedom in East Timor

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This talk was presented to the Asia Pacific Solidarity Conference, April 10-13, Sydney, by Naldo Rei, an Australian-based East Timorese activist and writer.

The struggle for freedom and independence in East Timor is not something new because it has already been more than 23 years that the East Timorese have been fighting the Indonesian forces for freedom and independence. The Maubere people have suffered at the hands of the Suharto military regime for a long time and they will continue to suffer until the Indonesians are defeated and driven out of East Timor.

Since the invasion of East Timor on December 7, 1975, the Timorese have suffered in cities. The majority fled to the forest to wage a guerilla war against the invading force of Indonesians colonialists. The slaughter began. Innocent people were killed and tortured like hunted animals. Women were raped by Indonesian soldiers while being watched by their husbands, children, parents. What sort of disaster is this? Will this suffering be in vain? All of the East Timorese people have been affected, each having known somebody who was killed.

The Indonesian occupation has changed our lives. The forest has become our place to hide from the bullets of the Indonesian military. We come from all directions and we were forced to accustom ourselves to a life in the jungle. We learnt to sharpen our senses in order to survive. We had to learn to live with hope from day to day.

As children we witnessed our parents, our family, our relatives being violated, killed, tortured. We constantly ask ourselves: did they die from the gunshots that we heard everyday? More than 200,000 people have died. This amounts to one third of the population of East Timor before the Indonesian invasion.

Genocide was a part of the Indonesian plan for East Timor from day one. Besides the slaughtering of people and unexplained disappearances, women as well as schoolgirls were forcefully injected with depo provera, a form of permanent contraception. Famine was induced and many people died from inadequate food supplies and malnutrition. The health service provided by the Indonesian government is of a low standard and it is also very expensive. These health services cannot be trusted as babies are killed and women are subject to further injections of depo provera. Also the military are allowed to kill patients at will, something that happened during the Dili massacre.

The question now is how many photos, documentaries and testimonies are needed before positive action is taken?

There are three networks working to free East Timor: the clandestine network, the armed struggle and the diplomatic work.

Falintil was founded by Fretilin in August, 1975. When the Indonesian invasion took place on the

December 7, 1975, Falintil played its role as the real military arm of the people of the East Timor. In 1988, Fretilin declared Falintil as a non-partisan armed force for the liberation of East Timor.

The youth in East Timor also helped in the diplomatic struggle and have helped provide external links between East Timor and the rest of the world. It was the clandestine network which organised the series of embassy jumps from 1994 up to now. This was the last resort for the youth involved to save their own lives. The youth who jumped the embassy fences also helped to revive international attention back to the East Timorese struggle.

Diplomats are working to gain international support to pressure the Suharto government to grant independence to East Timor. Petitions and protests around the world are continually being organised. Lobbying governments and conferences such as the Asia Pacific Solidarity Conference are an example of what can be done by the youth outside of East Timor. The call for a United Nations-facilitated referendum is another objective of the diplomats working for East Timor.

An action plan has been developed since 1975. The struggle must continue. With the death of Konis Santana, the resistance was able to get back into action due to its well-organised plan.

The Australian government has disregarded the help and sacrifices the East Timorese gave to Australian troops during World War II. Around 50,000 people died helping the Australians defeat Japan. It seems that Australian governments always act out of self interest.

The East Timorese asked for help in return, the cries were not heard. Economics overtakes people as oil is traded for their lives. The Australian government signed the Timor Gap Treaty with Indonesia which, under international law, is illegal as Indonesia is not recognised as the leading power of East Timor. Australia is one of the low countries that considers Indonesia to be the governing power of East Timor.

The East Timorese living in exile continue to work for their motherland by lobbying the governments of the countries in which they live. Youth are involved in the protests as well as with conferences and the media.

A convention of the diaspora is to take place in Lisbon, Portugal in April. This convention will discuss the Magna Carta and will analyse the present political situation nationally as well as internationally. This convention hopes to help accelerate the process of liberation of East Timor.

The East Timorese in the diaspora have a role to play in the identity of our culture. Culture is a way of resistance as it teaches us to value ourselves as a people. Cultural assimilation has been in another way in which Indonesia plans to integrate East Timor. Bahasa Indonesia has been forced on us and those that are found speaking Tetun are punished. The East Timorese living overseas are linked by culture.

Unity is very important. East Timorese need to show a united front against Indonesia to show desire for freedom. People must unite to fight for the cause, which is to free East Timor from the oppression from Indonesia.

For us, the youth, Xanana Gusmao is the leader of the East Timor resistance. We are working to free the political prisoners in Indonesia and in East Timor. Xanana Gusmao has given his life and sacrificed everything to fight for his country. He is an inspiration for the youth of East Timor.

An international action plan needs to be introduced to outline ways that can help to free East Timor. Some methods have already been mentioned. Also money is needed for food and better medical services. Youth should be involved as much as possible as they are the future of East Timor.

Strategies need to be implemented in order for East Timor to be free. The Maubere people need your support in order for us to win.

Motherland or death!

The struggle will continue until we win!