

## Australia Dossier by Robert Barwick

### Big push for Timor independence

*Australia has sowed the wind over this Indonesian province, and now it will reap the whirlwind.*

With one eye to major troubles in East Timor, the Indonesian province just a few hundred kilometers to the north, the Australian government announced on March 11 that it is doubling the percentage of its 32,000-man defense force which can be deployed for combat within 28 days.

This dramatic shift in Australian Defense Force readiness is just the latest in a series of fast-moving developments that have followed Indonesia's shock announcement in late January, that 24 years after taking over the former Portuguese colony in 1975, it is prepared to withdraw its troops and grant the Timorese independence if they reject an offer of greater autonomy in a vote now scheduled for July. This raised the specter of a resumption of the civil war which erupted after Portugal's abrupt pullout in 1975. However, any threat to Australia's security is largely of its own making, because, together with Portugal, it helped force Jakarta's policy shift.

Indonesia's sudden shift on East Timor was preceded by a dramatic announcement by Australia in December, that it supports East Timorese "self-determination." It was a clear break with a 24-year policy, in which Australia had been one of the only countries in the world to recognize Indonesia's claim to sovereignty over East Timor, against the official position of the UN. This position dated from 1975, when Prime Minister Gough Whitlam supported the Indonesian takeover of East Timor.

Australia had come under intense criticism for that position, most notably from the brutal former colonial

master of the province, Portugal. The tension between the two countries reached a high point in 1992, when Portugal lodged a complaint against Australia at the International Court in The Hague, the Netherlands, over an oil treaty Australia had just signed with Indonesia relating to reserves in the oil-rich Timor Gap. Australia responded by closing down its Lisbon embassy.

However, in 1995, under the government of Socialist Prime Minister Antonio Guterres, who is very close to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama began overtures to Australia, and expressed his wish that the embassy be reopened. In February 1998, Gama had a dinner meeting with Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, which, though fiery, apparently initiated the beginning of a shift in Australia's attitude toward the province. Last December, Australian Prime Minister John Howard wrote to Indonesian President B.J. Habibie pressing for Timorese self-determination. Howard took personal credit for Indonesia's subsequent policy shift: "We are pleased at the change of heart in Jakarta," he told Melbourne radio 3AW on Jan. 29. "We played no small role in that. As you know, I wrote to President Habibie before Christmas indicating that we thought the time had come for a change in Indonesian policy."

However, the implications of Timorese independence are only just beginning to be fully understood. Thousands of non-East Timorese residents, including a large percentage of the

province's doctors, engineers, teachers, and businessman, have begun fleeing the territory, while pro-Indonesian guerrilla forces there have threatened to kill an Australian diplomat or journalist as a "sacrifice," to demonstrate that Australia's push for independence will inevitably lead to massive bloodshed. "It is better to sacrifice an Australian diplomat or journalist to save the lives of 85,000 East Timorese," two militia leaders wrote Downer in early March.

Ironically, even longtime independence agitator, Fretelin resistance leader, and Nobel Prizewinner José Ramos Horta expressed opposition to independence when Indonesia first mooted it, demanding instead that Australia play a key role in a UN interim administration. "It is obvious that the Indonesians are not going to be able to stay on in Timor, and I would object to immediate independence, so I would prefer to have an international transition administration in East Timor under the UN flag, in which Australia would play a major part," Horta said on Jan. 29. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan announced on March 13 that a UN peacekeeping team would be in Timor in April, and Australia has committed "administrative and technical" (as opposed to military) assistance to that force.

The British-American-Commonwealth cabal, of which Australia is a leading member, is on a mad drive to break up nation-states, as the world plummets deeper into financial and economic collapse. No doubt that cabal's cartels also have their eyes on the super-rich oil and gas reserves in the Timor Gap seabed under the Timor Sea, the exploitation of which is governed by the complex Timor Gap Treaty between Australia and Indonesia, and which are expected to be ceded to the newly independent East Timor.