
Indonesia

'Lusitania Expresso' provocation defused

by Lydia Cherry

A provocation of potentially grave danger was defused, at least for the moment, on March 11 when a dozen Indonesian warships turned back the *Lusitania Expresso*, a Portuguese-chartered "peace boat," as it came within sight of the East Timor coast. Students from around the world along with several dozen dignitaries, including the former president of Portugal, had intended to use the laying of a wreath on the grave where protesters were killed on Nov. 12, 1991 for maximum political effect in a campaign to split East Timor from Indonesia.

The promoters of the voyage, who in advertising for the "crew" had promised to pay all expenses, had envisioned the endeavor as a means of "creating an event of great media impact." The mission was to include journalists from every type of media, but mainly from television networks. British, Portuguese, and Australian press outlets were indeed doing their part in creating this event of "great media impact." In the face of the hefty Indonesian fleet, however, the event fizzled.

What was feared by some Australians in particular, was that the power play could be turned into a military clash between Australian/U.S. and Indonesian forces. The voyage was scheduled to place the protesters in the same area at the same time as the biggest U.S.-Australian war-game exercise in Australian history. "Kangaroo '92," now in process and reportedly two years in the planning, involves 12,000 Australian combat personnel and 880 Americans drawn from the U.S. Pacific command.

Relations between Australia and Indonesia have never been particularly warm, and the largest group of dignitaries onboard the *Lusitania Expresso* were Australians. Furthermore, statements made by Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating calling for caution and recommending that the voyage be called off, as one Australian source noted, were "extremely limp-wristed."

Australian anxiety about the matter increased with the March 9 publication by the Melbourne daily *Herald-Sun* of an interview with an Australian Defense Department spokesman. The spokesman said the military exercise will not stand idly by if Indonesia attacks the boat. The spokesman continued that the commanders of the allied ships "are very well aware of the [*Lusitania Expresso*] operation. They will be

keeping an eye all the way. If things go wrong [the peace boat] could become *the operation*" (emphasis added).

Indonesia takes firm approach

The Indonesian government made it clear from the outset that it would not yield to the provocation. A release from the Department of Foreign Affairs in Jakarta dated Feb. 25 stated "that the objective of this group in undertaking such a voyage is provocative in nature; that it is not all humanitarian but politically motivated and designed to instigate confrontation, aggravate tension, induce divisiveness, and incite disturbances in East Timor. . . . The Indonesian government declares the territorial waters of Indonesia closed to the vessel *Lusitania Expresso* . . . and, in accordance with its sovereign rights and for the sake of public order, will enforce the applicable national and international laws if the group persists in this voyage."

Nevertheless, Portuguese President Mario Soares continued to inflame the situation until the eleventh hour with statements like, "You must always fear dictatorships, which are governments that are apparently strong but really very weak; the weak are aggressive."

Who is footing the bill?

It was an international student grouping, the Peace in Timor Commission, that advertised for the ship's crew, making clear in a call that traveled on computer-nets: "All expenses, including trip from country of origin, lodging, feeding, and return trip, will be supported by the organization." At least \$1 million is estimated to have gone into the media show. There has been no discussion of who was footing the bill. The Portuguese government claims it had nothing to do with the organization of the mission but "appreciated its generosity and its moral importance." Portuguese President Soares and Prime Minister Anibal Cavaco Silva met with the student organizers of the voyage just before they left for Port Darwin, where the crew gathered before departing to East Timor.

The following personalities were part of the confirmed list of dignitaries scheduled to sail. From Portugal, Gen. Antonio Farnalho Eanes, former President of Portugal; Rui Oliveira Costa, leader of the Portuguese trade union, the UGT; and A. Barbedo de Magalhaes, a professor at Oporto University. From the United States, among other Americans, was a Brown University Dean, David Targan, reported to be a good friend of Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.). From Australia, Jean McLean, a left Labour Party Member of Parliament from Victoria, was onboard, as was Shirley Shackleton, widow of an Australian journalist killed in East Timor during the civil war situation in the province in the mid-1970s, prior to its annexation to Indonesia. Some of the other Australian dignitaries were Paul Matters, secretary of the South Coast Traders and Labor Council, and Bernard Collaery, former Australian Capital Territory attorney general.