

# Solidarity in the Field -- Observing Timor-Leste's Consultation\*

By Charles Scheiner and Pam Sexton†

## Abstract

The International Federation for East Timor (IFET) was formed in 1991 by groups from Europe, Asia, and North America to coordinate international solidarity campaigns. In 1999, the IFET Observer Project (IFET-OP) was the largest international delegation to observe East Timor's Referendum. IFET's UN-accredited observers began arriving in June, and, by 30 August, 125 people from 20 countries were living with communities in every district. IFET-OP did not advocate for autonomy or independence, but supported the right of Timor-Leste's people to self-determination and hoped that their presence would deter Indonesian violence.

This paper explores the rationale for the project and the model it offers for people-to-people solidarity. It discusses the experiences of teams in the field during campaigning, voting and in the aftermath of the vote, and their role in deterring and reporting on violence, and the ongoing outcomes of IFET-OP during the ensuing two decades.

## Background

For 37 years following the 1975 Indonesian invasion, 'the question of East Timor' was on the United Nations agenda. During the first 23 years of occupation, the Security Council passed two resolutions urging Indonesian withdrawal, and the General Assembly passed eight. Yet the governments of the world declined to resolve the situation or obtain justice for the Timorese people.

Until the late 1980s, Indonesia closed the territory to outside observers; Western media and governments largely ignored the ongoing slaughter of approximately 200,000 Timor-Leste people. Timor-Leste was, at that time, the quintessential obscure lost cause, followed only by a tiny fringe of hard-core activists. Throughout this period, powerful nations like the United States, Britain and Australia increased economic, military and political ties with Jakarta, while also running interference for Indonesia in the UN and other international fora.

But for the persistence of the Timorese resistance, the story might have ended there. As Indonesia began to open the territory to visitors, the Timorese formed a civilian underground to break through the wall of silence, smuggling information about the occupation to the few outsiders who would listen.

The underground also carried out nonviolent protests, first during the Pope's visit in 1989 and more massively on 12 November 1991, when the Indonesian military killed at least 271 unarmed Timorese at the Santa Cruz cemetery. Witnessed by international journalists, images and reporting of the Santa Cruz Massacre shocked the world and briefly broke through the global media blackout. More lastingly, the Santa Cruz massacre catalysed the re-emergence of a worldwide solidarity movement.

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## Solidarity grows

The International Federation for East Timor (IFET) was formed in July 1991 by groups from Japan, Europe, and North America to inform and lobby the UN to support self-determination. As groups around the world expanded or began solidarity work following the Santa Cruz Massacre, IFET provided international coordination for UN testimony and monitoring of UN processes. By 1999, IFET included 30 solidarity groups from every continent, offering loose but broad cooperation (IFET 1998).

Other conduits for cooperation included the internet, Christian church networks and regional conferences such as those organized by the Asia-Pacific Coalition on East Timor (APCET). Individual solidarity groups were small but formidable, each independently deciding its audience, constituency and strategy. In Portugal, widespread grassroots activity forced the government to advocate for Timor-Leste's rights in European and international circles. In the US, the East Timor *Action Network* (ETAN) focused on ending US support for the occupation.

When the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Timor-Leste leaders José Ramos Horta and Bishop Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo at the end of 1996, solidarity groups around the world were able to capitalize on the attention on Timor-Leste. It can't be over-emphasized how the courage, commitment, strategic organization, and ready communication of the broad-based Timorese resistance – within Timor-Leste, in Indonesia and in exile – made international solidarity possible and effective.

## Setting the Stage

Following Suharto's fall in 1998, new President B. J. Habibie was dealing with an intractable economic crisis. His hold on power tenuous, he sought increased international support, and thus suggested allowing the Timorese to vote on an autonomy plan to remain with Indonesia. He and his Foreign Minister Ali Alatas believed that the electorate, with sufficient incentive and threats, would support the plan, and make the nuisance of international solidarity for Timor-Leste disappear. For the first time in 24 years, Jakarta entered substantive negotiations with the UN and Portugal in an effort to resolve the Timor-Leste issue.

The Indonesian military (TNI) did not share this confidence that Jakarta would win the vote, and stepped up its creation and arming of Timorese paramilitary groups (so-called militias) to terrorize the Timorese people from voting for independence. By using militias, the TNI hoped to plausibly deny direct involvement in the terrorism. From late 1998 onward, TNI's militias escalated their violence. By early 1999, massacres were a weekly occurrence, and tens of thousands were displaced from their homes.

As international activists, IFET member groups tried to bring these developments to the attention of the negotiators. On 30 March, for example, IFET sent a videotape of a recent Australian TV program *A Licence to Kill* to Secretary-General Kofi Annan (ABC 1999), and wrote:

*We have been concerned by recent statements by your office and by the Indonesian government that disarmament of the paramilitaries and withdrawal of Indonesian soldiers from Timor-Leste are not seen as prerequisites to the 'ballot consultation' in which the Timorese people are to accept or reject Indonesia's offer of autonomy. As this program makes clear, a UN-conducted Timorese vote in the current atmosphere of terror would be a mockery of everything the United Nations stands for (IFET 1999a).*

Negotiations continued, and Indonesia and Portugal were approaching agreement with the Secretary-General to allow Indonesia to handle 'security' before and during the vote. In early April,

militias massacred more than fifty refugees in Liquiça; eleven days later they murdered a dozen refugees in the home of prominent independence advocate Manuel Carrascalão.

On 21 April, Indonesian Defence Minister General Wiranto flew to Timor-Leste and proclaimed a cease-fire between militias and the resistance. The militias never intended to honour the agreement; they inflicted new atrocities hours after signing. The pro-independence forces, felt compelled to sign to maintain credibility with the pro-Jakarta international community and to refute Jakarta's propaganda that Timor-Leste would erupt into civil war if TNI withdrew. IFET again expressed its concern to the Secretary-General and the Indonesian and Portuguese Foreign Ministers, who were in New York negotiating the final details of an agreement scheduled to be signed on 5 May:

*...the paramilitary violence persists, and Indonesia has made no significant efforts to control it. Murders continue daily, militia leaders exhort their coerced followers to assassinate pro-independence leaders and human rights workers with impunity, and tens of thousands of internal refugees live in fear for their lives. ...*

*As soon as the 5 May accord is signed, the United Nations must assume responsibility for creating and preserving law and order in Timor-Leste, and for protecting public safety. The Indonesian military has been there illegally for 23 years, and their occupation has taken more than 200,000 East Timorese lives. ... It will be impossible for the United Nations to conduct a meaningful assessment of East Timorese public opinion if those forces – one party to the conflict – are controlling the situation on the ground (IFET 1999b).*

Although the Secretary-General and other UN officials were fully aware of the danger of the Jakarta-backed militias, they were unable to persuade any national government to make this issue public. The agreement signed on 5 May set the stage not only for the 30 August vote, but also for the terrorism and destruction that preceded and followed it.

The Secretary-General and others later justified allowing the Indonesian military to retain control during the referendum by saying that Jakarta would not have agreed under any other terms. They believe that China, at Indonesia's request, would have vetoed any Security Council resolution that did not leave TNI in charge. However, no government put even the slightest pressure on Indonesia to allow international responsibility for security. If the international community had threatened to curtail economic and/or military cooperation with Indonesia in April, as they finally did in mid-September, much devastation could have been avoided.

### **The Activists' Dilemma**

People around the world who had worked for years to advance Timor-Leste's human and political rights pondered how to make the best of a bad situation. We supported the desire of the East Timorese people (as expressed by CNRT‡ leader Xanana Gusmão) that the consultation proceed, and sought ways to help make the vote free, fair and peaceful. Anticipating that in a free and fair vote the Timorese people would choose independence, many solidarity activists joined UNAMET, the UN mission organizing the referendum.

IFET chose to support and monitor UNAMET and the parties to the vote from inside Timor-Leste. UNAMET's parameters were defined by the 5 May agreements and resulting Security Council resolutions; their personnel were constrained by UN protocol to refrain from expressing criticism of member states or public dissent from established UN positions.

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‡ National Council of Timorese Resistance – the umbrella including all pro-independence organizations.

IFET offered the power of a unified, decentralized, nonpartisan observer project to share expertise, experience and resources, and to present a stronger voice for advocacy. Long-developed trust among IFET members enabled a massive project to be put together very quickly. As a broad international effort, the IFET Observer Project (IFET-OP) attracted funding and support from groups which had previously been less involved in Timor-Leste solidarity.

IFET-OP became the largest of the dozen international observer delegations in Timor-Leste. There were also about a dozen Indonesian observer groups, with both pro- and anti-autonomy biases. As a UN-accredited project, IFET Observers were nonpartisan, taking no position on whether people should vote for autonomy or independence. IFET Observers were committed to nonviolence and to people's right to a free and fair election, without intimidation.

IFET volunteer observers, from almost every continent and trained in advance, began arriving in Timor-Leste in June. Field teams monitored the registration and campaign phases, built relationships with the local people, and attempted to communicate with all sides (although the militia were rarely willing to talk). By 30 August, 125 UN-accredited IFET Observers from 20 countries were deployed in 18 teams, covering every district.

UNAMET had about 450 non-police international staff and about 4,000 local staff, barely enough to implement the mechanics of the vote on a very tight timetable. The UN mission was also limited by diplomatic compromises, institutional goals, insufficient international political will and its hierarchical structure. IFET-OP, the Carter Center and other groups were independent observers, with fewer constraints. Although IFET members had long campaigned against the brutal and illegal Indonesian occupation, we were committed to genuine self-determination for the East Timorese people, and to expose problems and recommend solutions whenever logistics, intimidation or politics threatened to undermine the process.

IFET-OP relayed what we and the local population observed to the UN, the media, and world governments. IFET-OP teams lived in communities, walking through villages and staying visible in the hope that the presence of international observers would help deter militia violence. IFET-OP would be global eyes, voices and hands – a direct link between the Timorese people and grassroots people around the world, unmediated by governments or journalists. Through the international network of Timor-Leste support groups that had developed since 1991, IFET-OP would inform and lobby governments to make the consultation as free as possible.

### **Observing the campaign**

Observers quickly saw that the problem of leaving security in Indonesia's hands was not just theoretical. IFET-OP's first in-country report described a 4 July militia attack on a humanitarian aid convoy, which included an IFET observer, in Liquiça 'while the police and military stood idly by.' IFET-OP pointed out that the humanitarian crisis – 30,000-60,000 people had already been forced from their homes by militias – 'directly affects the validity of the vote' and called on Indonesia to disarm the militias, to fulfil its commitment 'to ensure an 'environment devoid of violence or other forms of intimidation' as a 'prerequisite for the holding of a free and fair ballot in East Timor' (IFET 1999c).

On 6 August, in Same, Manufahi, the IFET-OP team witnessed and reported a militia assault on a just-opened student pro-independence campaign headquarters. This was the first of many attacks on the pro-independence campaign; CNRT offices in many towns were fire-bombed or worse. IFET-OP concluded that the election would not be free and fair if one side could not campaign publicly (IFET 1999d).

The IFET-OP served as an alert system for the UN Civilian Police, often asking these unarmed advisors to intervene in difficult situations (they were very cooperative and efficient, given their strict limitations of mandate and resources).

In addition to sending reports to observers' home governments, to media sources in various languages, and to the UN Ambassadors of the Security Council countries, IFET-OP teams often briefed foreign delegations and reporters in Timor-Leste. Visiting parliamentarians told IFET observers that they appreciated their accessibility and well-informed openness, while journalists appreciated the international connection, as their readers could identify with the grassroots IFET-OP volunteers.

The largest accredited Observer Project was KIPER, a joint Indonesian-East Timorese mission initiated by Solidamor, a group of courageous Indonesians supporting East Timorese self-determination. However, KIPER volunteers were limited by lack of resources and were targeted by militia violence. Many of their Timorese members resigned as observers in order to take a partisan role in the campaign. Many IFET-OP teams coordinated with KIPER throughout the referendum process.

**IFET-OP and KIPER volunteers in front of UNAMET banner that says in Indonesian and Tetum 'UNAMET guarantees the secrecy of your vote'.**



After a year of militia violence in the southern district of Covalima, the Suai Church and nearby skeleton of a new church under construction were filled with hundreds of displaced families. IFET observers made daily visits to both churches. Marked by the militia as supporters of independence, the displaced families, whose numbers grew during the lead-up to the vote, faced regular threats from militias.

The referendum's two sides agreed to campaign on alternate days, but the 'reject' autonomy

(support independence) side was usually prevented from public campaigning by militia threats, as IFET-OP repeatedly reported. When allowed to hold a rally, Indonesian trucks filled with heavily armed military personnel – claiming protector status – were close by, taking notes and photos, clearly with intent to intimidate.

### CNRT Campaign Rally



The East Timorese often confided in or asked IFET observers for help. On 17 August, at the start of campaigning, IFET-OP reported ‘warnings by government officials and pro-autonomy spokespersons of large-scale violence if the East Timorese people reject the autonomy option in the 30 August vote, along with widespread reports of arms shipments entering the territory’ and recommended ‘that the international community work diligently through the UN to broaden the UNAMET mandate as it relates to security, and to increase significantly the numbers of United Nations security personnel in Timor-Leste before the 30 August vote’ (IFET 1999e).

Seeing no response, IFET-OP wrote a public letter from Dili to the UN Secretary-General on 24 August, describing ‘pervasive fears within the East Timorese population that the Indonesian military-backed militias will launch a wave of terror around, or shortly after, the time of the ballot’ (IFET 1999f).

Many in the IFET-OP project were pacifists with principled views against military force. When IFET-OP’s letter to Annan recommended ‘a much larger international security presence, preferably armed, to maintain security following the vote’ several of IFET-OP’s country coordinators (who relayed IFET-OP reports to media and officials in their own countries, and campaigned for their recommendations) stood aside from the decision. IFET observers in Timor-Leste and the East Timorese we spoke with could see no other choice.

As IFET-OP’s reports became more outspoken, the observers’ presence increasingly disturbed the pro-Indonesian side. Militias often threatened them; on three occasions they surrounded IFET-OP vehicles, brandishing weapons at the occupants. An East Timorese IFET driver was

kidnapped (and later released unharmed) in Liquiça. Another team, in Same, listening to radio conversations between Kopassus and local militia, heard their own murders being ordered (Harpers 1999). But they avoided the trap, and no IFET-OP people were injured. It became clear that the overall militia orders were to scare foreigners, not to harm them.

CNRT's enthusiasm overcame caution on the Thursday before the vote, and a 20,000-person rally was followed by a joyful caravan all over Dili. Although that day was mostly peaceful, the militias retaliated on Friday, killing about a dozen people in various parts of the city. For the first time, sharp international reaction pressured Indonesia to curtail the violence, but a siege mentality pervaded Dili's militia groups, and most people stayed home until Monday's vote.

On Saturday, 28 August, IFET-OP reported that

*The upsurge in violence over the last two days places the entire consultation process in jeopardy. ... Unless the United Nations and the international community take quick and decisive action to stem the violence, the results of Monday's balloting will be contaminated by fear (IFET 1999g).*

Decisive action was not forthcoming. The US State Department portrayed the latest violence as a new development, and expressed concerns, while at the same time, a different message was being conveyed by the US military. Between 11 and 25 August, the US Navy conducted joint exercises with the Indonesian Navy off Surabaya (Mueller 1999). The Pentagon was simultaneously training Indonesian soldiers (ostensibly in non-military subjects) at the National Defense University (Ft McNair, DC) and in California (Chandrasekaran 2000).

### **The vote – and its aftermath**

30 August was a glorious day. Most voters went to the polls before dawn, hoping that darkness would reduce the likelihood of militia attack. They waited patiently for hours to cast their ballots, a brief pause after 23 years of horrific sacrifice. IFET observers, sometimes visiting more than one polling center in the day, monitored balloting at 135 of the 200 polling centres.

Although there were a few violent incidents, the day was generally peaceful and nearly everyone voted before noon. By the time the polls closed, 98.6% of the registered voters had transcended intimidation.

Counting took five days, and the threats and violence mounted rapidly. By 1 September, four East Timorese UN workers had been murdered, militia roadblocks were proliferating, and many East Timorese close to IFET felt that proximity with IFET observers now brought risk, not safety. IFET-OP withdrew four observer teams from the field, and decided to pull the rest back to Dili and Baucau within the next few days.

Although the 30 August vote stands as a monument to the dedication of local and international UNAMET personnel and the incredible courage of the East Timorese people, the ensuing disaster was not only predictable, but could have been prevented by major powers at any time from April to mid-August.

On 2 September, IFET-OP assessed the Consultation Process, finding that the voting itself was administered in a free and fair manner, but that security was still inadequate and the East Timorese lived in a state of 'fear for their lives' (IFET 1999h).

The result was announced on Saturday morning, 4 September: 78.5% for independence. Most IFET observers, now in Dili, watched it on CNN. The group clapped once, an embarrassed lapse of non-partisanship. Throughout the day, IFET-OP received reports of increasing violence – the

destruction of Timor-Leste had begun in earnest.

On Sunday, conditions only got worse, and many IFET observers left with most other foreigners on hastily chartered flights. About 50 remained, although virtually continuous gunfire and widespread militia activity forced them to abandon several houses in Dili. Sunday evening, the office of the human rights group Yayasan HAK was attacked; police intervened only after an hour of shooting, and only in response to US embassy complaints that an American IFET observer was inside.

Later that night, Indonesian police evacuated the IFET-OP headquarters in Dili, including all observers and Timorese support staff. Forced to spend the night at Indonesian riot police headquarters, half of the remaining observers left the next morning. Two dozen observers stayed, taking reports of atrocities throughout the day: people murdered in Bishop Belo's residence; a thousand forced from the Red Cross office, which was then destroyed; attacks on the Australian Ambassador's car; thousands of East Timorese loaded at gunpoint onto ships and trucks.

IFET-OP was one of the last links between the destruction of Timor-Leste and a world that was running away. But, as the day proceeded, we came to believe that the rules had changed, that foreigners were now targets. The IFET observers still in Dili took the Monday night evacuation flight to Darwin, along with some hundred UNAMET personnel. The last IFET observers were evacuated the next day from Baucau.

**Ave Maria Church in Suai was the scene for a brutal massacre on 6 September 1999**





In Darwin, IFET-OP held a press conference and issued a statement on 7 September, excerpted here:

*We left East Timor for safety, but with tremendous sadness. The East Timorese people have no Australia to run to, no place to hide from militia terror. Last night, Australia and Indonesian military officers prevented one of our East Timorese staff members from boarding the plane with us -- and he faces an unspeakable horror shared by hundreds of thousands of his fellow East Timorese. ...*

*As we escaped East Timor, both IFET-OP and the people we left behind kept thinking of 1975, when the international community abandoned East Timor, allowing the Indonesian military to invade and kill 200,000 people with impunity while the nations of the world closed their eyes.*

*It is beginning to happen again -- and this time it must not be ignored... By its actions, the Indonesian military has not only declared war on the people of East Timor, but on the United Nations -- the representative of all nations of the world. No government would respond to such attacks with delegations and discussions. ...*

*For months, the world has accepted the Indonesian fiction that the militias, the military, and the police are separate entities. As our observers have seen in numerous incidents, and as virtually every East Timorese person knows in their bones, these are interchangeable uniforms with the same people, the same weapons sources, and the same purpose...*

*Tens of thousands of East Timorese have fled to the mountains to escape militia terror. Nearly as many have sought sanctuary in churches, police stations, UNAMET compounds and elsewhere. They face militia attacks, starvation, disease and death from lack of security, food, water and health care -- and yet no reliable protection, aid agency or international support is allowed near them.*

*Equally frightening are widespread reports of East Timorese civilians and refugees being forced onto trucks or ships and taken away to West Timor or other Indonesian islands. Nobody knows how many have been abducted, but it is certainly in the thousands. Where are these people taken to, and what will they face upon arrival? Without any oversight, images of genocidal slaughter from Indonesia's occupation of East Timor 24 years ago spring to mind.*

*Yesterday's declaration of martial law is an Orwellian manipulation of reality -- the militia wing of the military already controls nearly all of East Timor by their terrorist actions against UNAMET, civilians, foreigners, and, most seriously, pro-independence advocates -- more than 3/4 of the East Timorese people. ... (IFET 1999i).*

In the two weeks before international forces arrived, approximately 400,000 East Timorese people (half of the population) were driven from their homes, and nearly all the towns were destroyed. Approximately a thousand people were murdered (Chega, 2013). Approximately 290,000 persons were displaced to West Timor in Indonesia. Of these, 150,000 persons were contained within approximately 200 camps. An epidemiological investigation concluded that the mortality rate was 2.3 persons per 10,000 per day (Bradt and Drummond 2008). As a consequence, more than a thousand people, mostly children, are believed to have died as a result of inadequate food, health care and sanitation. Almost all of the twenty houses IFET-OP rented were looted then demolished, and our local staff dispersed to Australia, Indonesia, and the mountains of Timor-Leste. While some IFET observers travelled to Kupang and other parts of Indonesia to support grassroots efforts to protect Timorese activists, most observers soon returned to their home countries to lobby more effectively for international military intervention.

### Solidarity protest near UN Headquarters, September 1999



#### Following up

The IFET-OP presented information at the Emergency Session of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva in late September. Although IFET offered to provide the UN investigating team with detailed information about Indonesian crimes in Timor-Leste, we were never contacted (IFET 1999j).

IFET also testified on 6 October at the General Assembly in New York. We pointed out that a fundamental error made by the UN was 'failing to listen to the East Timorese people, whose knowledge and observations, if heeded, would have averted the recent disaster.' Perhaps it is an intrinsic element of the UN, composed of national governments, not to heed the cries of people who have no government to represent them (IFET 1999k). This despite the fact that Chapter XI of the UN Charter implies 'a sacred trust' to uphold 'the well-being of the inhabitants' of non-self-governing territories such as Portuguese Timor..

With the subsequent development of the UN Transitional Administration for East Timor, many of the same mistakes were repeated. Not only did the international community defer to Indonesian sovereignty over the East Timorese who were kidnapped and taken to West Timor, but the interim UN government made autocratic decisions which the people of Timor-Leste have had to live with. Many international NGOs came to Timor-Leste at this critical time without understanding the context or recognizing many existing, capable East Timorese organizations. The disparity (in salary, living conditions, transportation, authority) between international and local staff created a sense that a new occupation had replaced the Indonesian one.

In May 2000, returned IFET-OP observers and local activists launched *La' o Hamutuk* (Tetun for 'Walking Together') as a joint East Timorese/international project to bridge the massive gap between international agencies, governments, and the UN on one side and the Timorese people on the other, and to explore alternative models of development and solidarity which would reflect the aspirations of most Timorese. 19 years on, *La' o Hamutuk* continues to play an important role in offering a critical and independent voice (independent meaning non-partisan to party politics, big donors and government), promoting transparent and democratic practices of government, human rights for all, and equitable evidence-based policy (La' o Hamutuk 2019).

Together with others, *La' o Hamutuk* has advocated for justice regarding crimes against humanity committed by Indonesian actors in Timor-Leste. While Article 160 of Timor-Leste's Constitution states that these crimes of the past are subject to 'criminal proceedings with the national or international courts', investigations have stalled and been deferred to Indonesian processes. To date, no Indonesians have been held responsible for crimes committed during the occupation, and some of the orchestrators of genocidal military policy have risen to high political office in Indonesia. Since 2003, IFET – alongside local NGOs – has repeatedly called for meaningful action by the Timorese government and the United Nations on the issue of justice (IFET 2003).

For many individuals, involvement in the IFET-OP profoundly impacted long-term personal and professional decisions. Many, including the authors of this paper, have lived for extended periods in Timor-Leste and continued to work for the principles which grounded the international solidarity movement. Many remained closely involved with international human rights work or found creative ways to weave Timor-Leste into their lives, including through work with the UN, NGOs, and continuing solidarity projects such as sister cities. IFET-OP and the overall case of Timor-Leste confirmed for many of us that principled and persistent solidarity can truly pay off, even when the likelihood of success seems small.

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