LEADERSHIP FOR A SUSTAINABLE CULTURE OF PEACE: THE UN MISSION IN EAST TIMOR

by Major Thomas Rippon, Commodore Roger Girouard and Eliot Lowey

East Timor is a tiny nation-state that occupies half of a small mountainous tropical island some 600 kilometres north of Australia. In the 17th century, the island was colonized by the Portuguese, but, in 1859, it was divided between Portugal (East Timor) and Holland (West Timor). After the end of the Second World War, when the Dutch withdrew from the East Indies, the newly independent Republic of Indonesia incorporated West Timor, but the Portuguese retained control of the eastern part of the island while allowing a form of democratic self-government.

The two major political parties in East Timor were the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), which wanted to retain links with Portugal, and the Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor, known as the Fretilin, a left-wing socialist party that advocated independence. Violence was endemic, and Indonesia made an unsuccessful attempted to intervene politically in 1974. In August 1975, the Timorese Democratic Union organized a military coup with the objective of destroying the Fretilin. However, the Fretilin army, the Falinti, defeated the forces of the Democratic Union, and its surviving members fled to West Timor. The Portuguese administration withdrew from the capital, Dili, and communicated that it would no longer rule the colony.

In December 1975, the Indonesian army, aided by the Timorese Democratic Union, launched an invasion of East Timor. This was supported by the United States, which, having only recently withdrawn from Vietnam, was concerned about yet another Communist threat developing. (The Americans at this time looked on Indonesia as an oil-producing, anti-Communist ally.) Even Australia, with immediate security interests in the region, acquiesced. Sensing that the international community had given it the green light, or at least would remain indifferent, in July 1976 Indonesia declared East Timor to be a territory under its control. The Indonesian occupation was marked by brutality, and some 100,000 East Timorese civilians were killed in the civil struggle. Over the next two decades, East Timorese leaders consistently pressed the plight of their people at the United Nations. But, since the United States continued to endorse the Suharto regime in Indonesia, the UN paid little attention to the repeated requests for intervention.

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THE UNITED NATIONS MANDATE FOR EAST TIMOR

On assuming office in May 1998, President B.J. Habibie of Indonesia announced that East Timor would be governed under a new form of constitutional arrangements. His motivation was perhaps more economic than altruistic. Habibie ordered that a referendum be held under supervision of the United Nations to ascertain if the people of East Timor wanted full independence, or if they wanted to remain part of Indonesia. The United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) was subsequently established to ascertain through consultation whether the East Timorese people would accept a constitutional framework of special autonomy for East Timor within Indonesia, or reject the proposal and see East Timor move toward independence.

This referendum was certainly not endorsed by all elements in the Indonesian government, especially factions in the Indonesian military that had been training and equipping an anti-independence militia in East Timor. Village lords, militia chiefs and Indonesian army leaders all had a stake in the status quo. The militia “became the armed instruments of interest groups committed to preserving the status quo”. Threats were made against anyone who supported the referendum process, including Australian diplomats and journalists. In January 1999, the East Timor internet domain was brought down by a faction within the Indonesian government in an effort to suppress the free flow of information.

The referendum was conducted in August 1999. Violence that had marked the referendum campaign exploded into open anarchy following the announcement in September that 78.5 percent of the population had voted for independence. The uprising was led by defiant officers of the Indonesian military and the East Timorese militia. Reports of widespread murder and massacre, along with rumours of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and the inability of President Habibie to assure the safety of UNAMET members, sparked the attention of the international community.

Concurrent with the uprising in East Timor, an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit was being held in Auckland, New Zealand. At an ad hoc meeting of APEC foreign ministers, a consensus was reached that further UN peacekeeping intervention was needed. With the assurance that the peacekeeping force would be truly international – not just Australian and American (although it was ultimately led by an Australian) – President Habibie formally submitted a request to the United Nations to have peacekeeping troops deployed to East Timor.

The UN Security Council took immediate action and, on 15 September 1999, it invoked Chapter VII of the UN Charter authorizing the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) to restore peace and security in East Timor. Resolution 1264 (1999) authorized the peacekeeping force “to restore peace to East Timor ... protect and support UNAMET in the carrying out of its tasks ... within force capabilities, facilitate humanitarian assistance operations ... and to use air, sea and land forces as may be required to restore and maintain peace, and achieve its mandate mission”. This was a mandate for peacemaking, not peacekeeping, and this marked the first time that the UN assumed total control of a country, albeit a country not yet recognized in the international community.

On 19 September 1999, INTERFET personnel began deploying as approximately 15,000 Indonesian army and Indonesian police started to withdraw. Some Indonesian troops and police did, however, remain in regions where UN peacekeepers could not be readily deployed, and they did retain control of some of their barracks. But, the most dangerous threat to peace and security came from the Timorese militia, led or advised by elements of the Indonesian army, and which included some members of the Indonesian forces (often from elite Special Forces) who dressed in militia garb.

On 25 October 1999, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) was created under the authority of UN Security Council Resolution 1272, and in February 2000 it began to function. UNTAET drew in large part on forces already serving under INTERFET and included, among other UN personnel, 1,270 UN civilian police who were given authority to make arrests. This was an integral part of the UN mandate to establish and maintain peace, because it allowed for the capture and arrest of militia members indicted for crimes against humanity, and who were known to be infiltrating back into their former villages as returning refugees.

Two and a half years later, on 19 May 2002, the UN flag was lowered over Dili as administrative, executive and judicial functions were returned...
to the Timorese people. This transition was motivated by the belief that a sustainable foundation for a culture of peace had been created under the leadership of the UN.

DISCUSSION

If one were to examine the efficacy of the UN deployment of peacekeepers in East Timor, success of the mission would be measured against the UN mandate: to restore and maintain a culture of peace. This would be achieved by adopting a differentiated leadership stance.

It must be said at the outset that the UN was reluctant to take decisive action when the Portuguese departed and Indonesia moved in. East Timor seemed simply yet another place where little progress could be achieved, and in any case the Indonesians had offered to serve as its benefactor. However, the effective lobbying campaign mounted by the independence movement, both in the halls of the UN and in the world media, slowly paid dividends, resulting in the political pressure that brought Indonesian President Habibie to acquiesce in a referendum. This was leadership by influence without formal power.

The UN finally provided a mandate under Chapter VII of the Charter with a vision and structure to implement. President Habibie had formal leadership authority, but had been influenced by external factors and forces. The concerted Australian commitment, motivated by the APEC Forum, provided the strategic and operational leadership, and the determination to achieve every aspect of the UN mandate, thus making right their previous abdication of responsibility. The independence movement demonstrated informal leadership by influence. They ‘triangled’ the media, the church and the communities, acting on Friedman’s concept that the emotional process of triangulation, when used effectively, can be as powerful as a hierarchy. Such triangulation had been effectively employed by Gandhi a half century earlier when he wanted to influence the legislative initiatives of General Smuts in South Africa.

Whether through optimism or a flawed assessment, the UN, however, failed to appreciate the multi-layered nature of power in Indonesia, and the reality of regional ‘tithing’ to the local leadership – civil, militia and military. This level of corruption meant the stakes were high for those who would lose power and influence by a successful independence vote. President Habibie may have been optimistic that the benevolence of Indonesian rule would win over the population, or he may simply have been happy to rid himself of a troublesome province that brought little of economic value and was a net drain on his treasury. The local barons were less sanguine, and much more treacherous. Prior to the UN intervention, leadership was lacking, as was a vision of a culture of peace through sustainable initiatives.

The lead-up to the vote brought a rising tide of intimidation and violence. Whether again through optimism, a lack of appreciation for the cultural factors at play, or cold feet on the part of the UN headquarters in New York, there was clearly a failure to take account of a worst-case scenario despite the fact that the symptoms of an imminent backlash were evident. The UN authorities were ill equipped to deal with the pre-vote violence, and with the Indonesian authorities’ inability or intransigence in addressing it, and they were simply overcome by the wave of vengeful retribution that was unleashed by the rampage.

The insult of rejection in the referendum was a profound motivator for the East Timorese militia and the Indonesian military. The scale of destruction perpetrated over the course of several weeks is almost beyond description. UN officials, journalists and indeed the East Timorese civilians ‘hunkered down’ or fled to the hills in an attempt to survive an explosion of retribution designed to punish and to remove any mark of improvement and investment by Jakarta. If the Timorese were to have their own country, they would have to build it from the very basics. The level of planning and efficiency that went into effecting the destruction is astounding. Dili, the capital, had some 70 percent of its infrastructure destroyed or damaged. Militias were seen to use fire trucks loaded with gas or kerosene in their water tanks, roaming from village to village and house to house spreading their terror.

With no UN constabulary or military force, and a UN administration almost cut off and often communicating only via emergency channels or through the Australian embassy (itself under siege), only courageous journalists were able to capture the images of horror, and influence world opinion
to take a stand against what was happening. This reporting coincided almost through happenstance with the APEC forum that was meeting in New Zealand. Had the news reports not been available for these deliberations, which included discussions among other neighboring Asian leaders, one wonders if Australian leadership alone would have moved the UN to act in time. Indeed, one of the miracles of the sad story of the violence is that there was initially a preponderance of effort made to destroy property, to send East Timor back to the dark ages in a literal sense. While some killing had occurred – notably in Suai where dozens were massacred as the Indonesian army and the militias moved towards the nearby West Timor border – there were relatively few deaths in light of the opportunities presented. If the militia’s intention was to go around again after the destruction of the infrastructure was completed, the rapid UN mandate and armed response of the region interrupted those plans.

The effects of diplomatic arm-twisting by the United States as well as Asian neighbours that brought about the Indonesian request for assistance to quell the violence cannot be overemphasized. The Habibie government, which would fall a scant few weeks later, undoubtedly suffered a tremendous loss of ‘face’, so important in Asia, before it could accept this course of action. The morning view of an armada of foreign ships off Dili harbour served as both signal and turning point to Indonesia. The world had had enough and was taking action. Even the militia warlords understood. That troops from Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom were first ashore would be no surprise. That they would be joined by others from Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, Singapore and other Asian nations confirmed that this was about international will and not simply a western agenda being played out. For the first time in the history of UN missions, a peacekeeping force assumed control of the governance and judiciary of the country. The UN force, by its very presence, ultimately provided the requisite leadership, and demonstrated that peace would be established by force, if necessary. The foundation for long-term sustainability for a culture of peace would be forthcoming.

While a comparatively rapid response to the crisis was vitally important, it would have been of no value had there been no robustness to the effort in terms of a military mandate and Rules of Engagement. Australian Major General Cosgrove’s forces stormed ashore with a Chapter VII mandate to bring about peace, not just hope for it. They could defend themselves, project power, and intervene to prevent the violence of the militias. Dili was secured first, and the remaining countryside was patrolled in the following weeks with more and more regularity, and with increasing staying power as the INTERFET force grew to nearly ten thousand.

If the arrival of the UN armada was the turning point, the firefight near the town of Suai was the defining engagement for the UN. To prove that the coalition force had no backbone, a cadre of militia engaged New Zealand troops near the border with West Timor. Though the UN troops took casualties, they broke the will of the irregulars to continue the fight. The integrity of the UN mission was tested, and, because it was upheld, the Militia never again mounted such a determined attack against the coalition. The concept of achieving peace by forceful means was validated in the short term although one can argue that only peace brought about through peaceful means is truly sustainable. What occurred with the INTERFET deployment was an end to fighting, a crucial step toward longer-term peacebuilding.

With security re-established, the flow of humanitarian aid could begin – a vital task given the loss of livestock, burned crops, poisoned wells and an entire planting season missed. Over time, stability, commerce and reconstruction would re-appear. While the classic ambivalence of non-governmental organizations toward the military was apparent, it was clear that with the militia turning to basic banditry to inflict punishment or simply to survive, the armed UN presence was essential to all other effort for months.

The UN mission’s major effort was focused on rebuilding the constabulary, the judiciary and the government administration of the fledgling nation after military security
should peacekeepers have been deployed earlier? If one adopts former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s proposal, An Agenda For Peace, as the gauge, then it is clear that UN peacekeeping intervention should have been initiated earlier to prevent gross violations of human rights. Today, economic, social and political initiatives are being employed as prevention measures for potential future violence and to bolster sustainable development, as envisioned by Boutros-Ghali.

should other intervention strategies have been employed? History demonstrates clearly that peace by peaceful means can be achieved, but with costs to human rights when force is being applied on the civilian population, as was the case in East Timor. Peace by forceful means, the methodology employed in East Timor, is a viable situational leadership structure that can reduce human casualties and destruction to the infrastructure of a nation, both of which threaten sustainability. To this end, the UN mission in East Timor was a partial success.

Did the UN provide the requisite leadership to establish sustainable peace? In the immediate term, yes. However, without long-term leadership, and continued peacekeeping and peacemaking intervention, this long-term goal will probably not be achieved. One need only examine other UN missions, such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone and the Congo, to realize that peace is very fragile without commitment through leadership for a sustainable culture of peace. This objective is too complex to be left to those who do not demonstrate the requisite leadership maturity to assure a culture of peace as an alternative to a culture of war and violence.

This concept of maturity and dealing with complexity cannot be overemphasized. With globalization has come a rash of exceptionally complex global challenges, some of which contributed to the culture of war and violence, as...
witnessed in East Timor. Others, such as environmental devastation, SARS, West Nile Virus, terrorism, and clandestine colonial social and political interventions worldwide threaten the potential for long-term peace. The greatest challenge may be whether or not we ourselves mature fast enough to achieve the critical mass of leadership for a sustainable culture of peace to seriously engage the global threats that are occurring. East Timor could be the flagship of future UN intervention strategies. For the UN to be successful in future missions, there must be a triumvirate alignment in leadership of the essential forces in the conundrum, a commitment for sustainability, and a vision for a culture of peace. If any one of these is absent, the probability of success will be greatly diminished. In this regard, Canada is in a position to play an integral leadership role for sustainable peace.


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