

# Report on East Timorese refugees in West Timor

11 November 1999. By Charmain Mohamed and Eric Umansky

## Summary

### Introduction

While international aid flows into East Timor, about a quarter of the country's population remains inside Indonesian West Timor. Many refugees want to return home, but they remain in West Timor only as a result of a campaign of human rights violations, intimidation and disinformation by armed groups within the refugee camps. Intimidation is also directed at international agencies resulting in the isolation of refugees from both humanitarian aid and repatriation efforts. So far only 28,000 refugees out of a total of 220,000 have been repatriated, while another 17,000 have crossed the border on their own. The return of refugees has dropped off, particularly from the Kupang area. According to a UNHCR spokeswoman "the situation in West Timor is getting worse."

This report is compiled from our investigations in West Timor and interviews with returned refugees in East Timor between 17 October and 3 November, and from reports of local NGOs, and official reports (sources and a full version of this report are available on request). We were officially accredited observers of the ballot in East Timor. After being evacuated from Dili, we stayed in Indonesia to carry out human rights investigations on behalf of TAPOL. Physical access to the refugee camps in West Timor was extremely difficult. At one, the police barred us from going beyond their command post and in many cases, interviewing refugees would have endangered their safety. In the circumstances, this report is not necessarily representative of the situation as a whole. Information on the fate of those who remain is worryingly scant.

### Forced Evacuation

Most refugees who crossed the border to West Timor were forced to cross by militia and/or TNI. One refugee reported: "I left Maliana September 19th. I was forced to go on a bus by TNI, militia and Kopassus...People with money paid to get on transport. I paid the driver and got on the bus, it was from Atambua. Those who didn't have money walked." There is also evidence that many families were separated during this forced evacuation to West Timor.

### The Militia and TNI

The TNI, militia connection remains. UNICEF liaison officer, Emmanuel Astillero, witnessed a meeting between "militia leaders and one and two star generals" in the Intan Hotel in Atambua. Several refugees have reported that Indonesian forces are still involved in the training of militia. One refugee said that in Turiskain camp the militia trained with Kopassus. "They forced male refugees to join in the training sessions...they were told it was to continue the war in East Timor." GMKI (Indonesian Christian Student Group), a local NGO, reported that 57 AK-47s, almost certainly from the Indonesian military, were distributed to militias in Tuapukan on October 27. UNHCR and UNICEF have also both confirmed militias openly training at Tuapukan camp in Kupang.

### Intimidation and Human Rights Violations

There are also accounts of daily intimidation and human rights violations in and around the camps. One witness saw two bodies wrapped in plastic inside a militia truck and two men with their hands tied behind their back. He then said that "several militia men took the two prisoners under the bridge...and stabbed them to death with knives." This incident happened only a few weeks ago in Belu district.

Refugees trying to cross the border unaided by the UN are also facing enormous intimidation. Those crossing near Maliana are having their possessions stolen by militia. One refugee who managed to cross heard that her brother "was killed by four militia on October 22nd in Hakisak...They took him at the border, back to the camp and stabbed him as he was trying to cross over...My parents saw the killing but they are still in West Timor." Many more witnesses and victims remain in West Timor.

### Information

There is a serious lack of information, and a campaign of disinformation by the militia and interested groups has exacerbated the situation. Many refugees want to return home, but believe it to be unsafe. Some who have returned, were made to believe that: Interfet has set up camps in East Timor, separating men, women and

children and raping the women; there is still a war in East Timor and it is not safe to return; and Interfet helicopters are flying near the border and killing refugees.

Some of the following information spread among the refugees may be accurate or speculation. It may also have been started by militia as part of a campaign of disinformation and intimidation. Regardless of the source, all of it adds to the general atmosphere of fear:

1. Militia have threatened to follow refugees back to East Timor where they will kill those who dared to return.
2. Body parts have been found outside of Kupang. As a result local people will not eat pork or dog meat, as they are concerned that these animals may be scavenging among corpses.
3. Women are being taken from the camps and returning with "ripped clothing."
4. Women are being taken from the camps and raped.

### **Repatriation and Access**

Although UNHCR has formal access to all the camps, local authorities have been lax in providing security. Many areas, particularly the Belu region, are too high-risk for UNHCR to operate effectively. On 8 November, militia stopped a convoy of three UNHCR trucks from picking up refugees at Halewen camp near Atambua airport. Despite police and army reinforcements, the militia forced UNHCR to pull back as their vehicles were being stoned. At least 18 such incidents have now occurred in the Belu region where around 60 percent of refugees in all of Indonesia are located.

One result of such intimidation is that the number of refugees leaving from the Kupang area has dropped off significantly. The numbers have decreased so much that IOM (International Organisation for Migration) has suspended all sea returns from Kupang despite the fact that at least 40,000 refugees are still in the area. According to Pos Solidaritas, a local NGO, about one and a half camps have been emptied out, but three or four remain.

### **Accountability**

At present there is no accountability for those who are guilty of intimidation and human rights violations. The UN Inquiry into human rights violations in East Timor has no mandate to investigate violations in West Timor. One UNTAET source, has said West Timor is a "side issue." Indonesian police have not yet arrested any militia members. A refugee who witnessed the killing of four men said the wife of one of the victims had reported the murders to TNI who failed to take any action.

### **Camp Conditions**

Resources are not being evenly distributed. At Noelbake camp, most residents only have dirt/mud flooring. However, the part of the camp housing the militia has raised concrete floors. GMKI have reported that refugees who wish to return home are being discriminated against in the distribution of rice. As the rainy season commences sanitation problems and disease will increase. GMKI report that as of November 9, 426 refugees had died of illness, including 128 babies under the age of five.

### **Conclusion**

From recent reports of militia attacks on UNHCR it is obvious that the situation in West Timor is deteriorating daily. There are many East Timorese who wish to return home, but militias are effectively holding them hostage. Continued and consistent intimidation and human rights violations are being perpetrated against refugees and are blocking UNHCR and international aid agencies from those most at risk. As Mr. Astillero from UNICEF states "we here in Kupang believe that some political action is needed. There are no clear statements coming from Jakarta. Embassies need to pressure the new (Indonesian) government to stop playing around. The problem is not in East Timor anymore, it's here."