



Global express

The rapid response information series for schools
on world events in the news

East Timor



ON 30TH AUGUST THE PEOPLE OF EAST TIMOR voted to sever ties with Indonesia after 24 years of armed occupation. Since then the country has descended into chaos and bloodshed. This edition of **Global express** gives eyewitness accounts of the situation, examines the global arms trade and gives arguments for and against military intervention.

What is
Global express?

Global express helps you teach about topical global issues and events.

Contains

Instant photocopiable classroom activities for 8 to 14 year olds.

Primary

- Where is East Timor?
- Find out about trade links
- Read the legend of East Timor

Secondary

- Discuss East Timor's right to freedom
- Plan a documentary
- Look at the arms trade
- Debate the role of the UN

Curriculum

- Literacy Hour
- Geography
- History
- Citizenship
- Modern Studies (Scotland)

East Timor suffers

"We are all waiting to die."

East Timorese woman who sheltered in the United Nations compound in the East Timor capital, Dili

On 30 August 1999, three-quarters of East Timor's population voted for independence from Indonesia in a UN-supervised referendum. Since then, armed militias who are against independence have killed, maimed and terrorised people in the region, including UN staff brought in to supervise the voting. Eye-witnesses report the attackers have been supported by the Indonesian army.

Thousands of people fleeing the violence have gone across the border into Indonesian West Timor; others have escaped into nearby mountains where they have had to eat plants and roots to survive; many other East Timorese have left the country entirely to escape from the violence which has so far claimed hundreds of lives. There are now hundreds of thousands of refugees.

The militias and army have herded tens of thousands of people onto boats bound for West Timor, leaving the city empty. There are reports of communities being reduced to ashes, and whole rows of houses being burnt to the ground.

"There is no sign of normal life," said one eyewitness in the East Timor capital, Dili. "The streets are almost deserted but for some stray pigs and dogs. There is no food anywhere in the city. The pavements are strewn with loot, piles of boxes, refrigerators, TV sets, sofas, thousands of plastic chairs and even a grand piano."

Hushed-up history

East Timor finally gained independence from Portugal in 1974, but was invaded the following year by Indonesia which claimed the country as its own. Over 200,000 Timorese people were killed in the invasion - a third of the original population. Since then, many local and international human rights organisations have tried to publicise the plight of East Timor, and bring international pressure on

the Indonesian government to return the country to independence.

During President Suharto's rule of Indonesia from 1965, Western countries wanted to gain access to Indonesia's untapped natural resources and potentially huge market - Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country. Their investment helped increase wealth and the strength of the military. Eventually the presence of the army was felt in all areas of Indonesian life and it was estimated that 70% of the economy was in the hands of the military.

But in May last year, student-led demonstrations forced Suharto out of office and he was replaced by a civilian leader, BJ Habibie. Early this year, Habibie's new government finally agreed to a UN-supervised referendum, allowing the people of East Timor to vote on whether to govern themselves.

What the media are saying

In Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, much of the news media portrays the violence as understandable outrage at a vote for independence rigged by the UN. TV footage shows the burning of US, Australian and UK flags, by demonstrators in Jakarta. There is no reporting of the razing of buildings, attacks or mass deportations being carried out by the militias and Indonesian army.

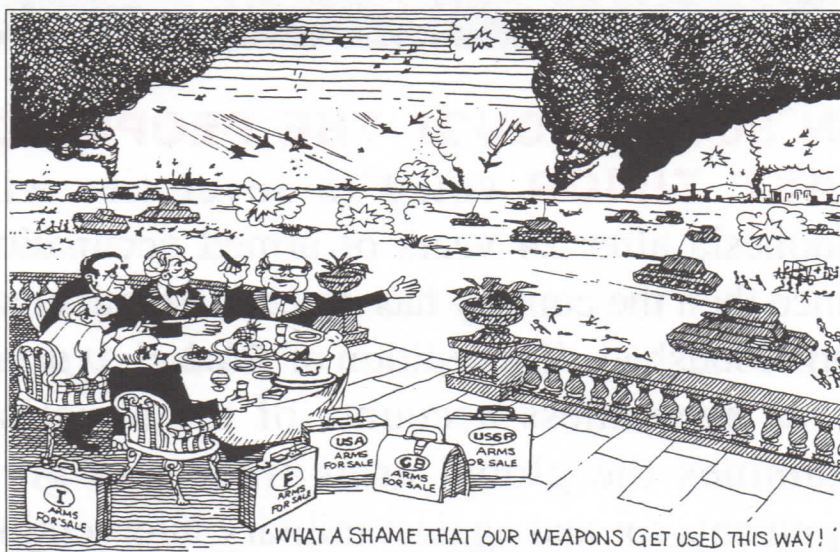
Some western media have been criticised for failing to fully report the problems in East Timor for years: "For almost 20 years, the BBC and other major western news agencies preferred to 'cover' East Timor from Jakarta, which was like reporting on a Nazi-occupied country from Berlin." (John Pilger, *The Guardian*, 7/9/99)

The media in the US and Britain have also been criticised for failing to fully report their countries' involvement in Indonesia's past, including the sale of arms, and for not recognising East Timor as a country.

One of the reasons this region is getting so much media attention is because of the amount of investment there from richer countries - Indonesia owes billions of dollars to Japanese, American and European banks, and these countries are anxious that Indonesia's economy becomes stable and grows in order to ensure that they get their investment back.

What happens next?

It is likely the situation will still be unstable as UN peacekeepers arrive. No-one knows what the response of the militias and Indonesian army will be, or how long the UN forces will stay. Even if the violence dies down, the threat of a humanitarian crisis looms. A huge relief effort will begin when the peacekeepers arrive.



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