

The near-Death of East Timor

Luncheon talk by Kerry Pither and Walter Dorn, February 2000.

The speakers' lunches for the 1999-2000 year got under way with chilling accounts of events in East Timor before and after the massive UN-sponsored vote for independence from Indonesia. Kerry Pither, national spokesperson for the East Timor Alert Network (ETAN), who visited East Timor with a delegation sponsored by the Canadian Labour Congress in August, spoke of Canada and other countries' long record of complicity in Indonesia's oppression of East Timor. Dr. Walter Dorn, a Canadian who is a senior research fellow at Cornell University and served as an electoral officer for the United Nations in East Timor from June to August last summer, described the horrors visited on the East Timorese by the militia under the protection of the Indonesian army.

Ms. Pither noted that the first visit of former president Suharto to Canada occurred in 1975 shortly before Indonesia's invasion of the former Portuguese colony. Within months of the invasion 60,000 of East Timor's population of 690,000 had been killed. While Canada and other countries looked the other way, the Indonesian army kept resistance down and about 100,000 settlers were moved in to try to dilute the native population. Within five years, over 250,000 - one-third of the pre-invasion population - had died of killing, and disease and starvation brought on by the invasion."

"East Timor became like a prison," said Ms. Pither. "People lived in carefully controlled areas. Through the 80s you couldn't hold a wedding without inviting the military. People were not allowed to own radios. East Timor was very difficult to visit. Everyone was kept track of. Military rape of women was commonplace. You had to leave the light on and the windows down when driving a car at night. Speaking the local language became a crime. Birth control was enforced - for most women it seemed to be the only state-provided health care available in East Timor."

After living this way for more than 23 years, it was not surprising that 78 percent voted for independence.

Between Suharto's meeting with Prime Minister Trudeau on 1975 and his attendance at the pepper-spray APEC meeting hosted by Prime Minister Chrétien in Vancouver in 1997, Canada afforded Indonesia "ample diplomatic, military, economic and financial support". Canadian firms did big business in Indonesia. To Ms Pither, who has been working with ETAN for eight years, the support for Indonesia was "completely inappropriate" in view of that country's suppression of East Timor.

This policy remained through to the end, she held. "Canada refused to condemn the very clear role the Indonesian military was playing in the violent campaign to subvert the vote, and refused to publicly call for international intervention until the rest of the world was doing so."

While groups like ETAN were calling for peacekeepers, UN personnel on the ground like Walter Dorn, who had studied the question of whether genocide in Rwanda could have been predicted and prevented, were urgently recommending the same thing. "I personally pleaded with leaders to bring in peacekeepers," said Dr. Dorn. He said he had been scarred for life and strengthened in some ways as well by his experience in East Timor.

Dr. Dorn told of accusations against himself of being a spy as he sought appropriate places to set up voter registration. He and other electoral officers had to thwart the efforts of militia men from West Timor to get on the voters' lists. In one church where he had registered East Timorese, about 200 people - the exact number still had to be established at the time Dr. Dorn spoke - were later massacred; priests were shot, grenades lobbed into the church.

The dreadful price paid for delay in getting UN peacekeepers into East Timor - they went in only after it was okayed by the Indonesian government - showed the need for a UN rapid reaction force to help meet future emergencies, Dr. Dorn said.