

Indonesian warship blasts island

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In a dramatic show of military muscle, an Indonesian warship has blasted a contested island near East Timor with gunfire and a missile just weeks after peacekeepers left the area.

A UN military report dated December 14, 2003, and seen by the press, says a camouflaged helicopter bearing Indonesian markings fired a missile into the disputed outcrop, known locally as Fatu Sinai, before a warship pounded the tiny uninhabited island with heavy gunfire.

The classified report says the shelling was witnessed by more than 150 terrified villagers living in Baoknana village on the Oecussi enclave, a pocket of East Timorese territory on the north coast of Indonesian West Timor.

Security analysts say the show of force marks Jakarta's determination to stamp its sovereignty on the disputed island it calls Pulau Batek.

The outcrop lies just 5km off East Timor's coastline at the western tip of the enclave.

Since September 2000, the UN and East Timor Government have been negotiating with Indonesia over matters relating to border demarcation.

A senior UN security analyst familiar with Oecussi said the shelling was a show of strength.

"The Indonesian side has not fulfilled any of its commitments and within 60 days of the withdrawal of UN troops the Indonesian military flexed its muscles with this display," the analyst said.

A spokesman for Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer said the Government was aware of the incident, but regarded it as a matter between Indonesia and East Timor.

"We are pleased that the unresolved issues are being handled in constructive discussions between the two countries concerned," the spokesman said.

Indonesia and East Timor are discussing land border issues, but maritime borders have not yet been raised.

The December incident underscores the vulnerability of East Timor's ill-defined maritime borders.

East Timor seceded from Indonesia after a bloody UN-brokered ballot in 1999 that saw a massive majority of the population vote in favour of independence.

The brash display of gunboat diplomacy raises fresh concerns over the timing of a planned withdrawal of Australian peacekeepers maintaining security along East Timor's main frontier with Indonesia.

East Timorese witnesses interviewed by UN observers said about noon on December 14 an Indonesian warship carrying a camouflaged helicopter approached the island, stopping within 100m of its southern tip.

The helicopter then took off and the warship withdrew to a new position facing the island but about 200m offshore.

The helicopter fired what is believed to be a missile that exploded on impact, creating a pall of smoke.

Then the warship sailed to within 400m north-east of the outcrop and fired 13 rounds of high explosive from what the UN said was a 40mm cannon.

Two hours later an Indonesian jet fighter believed to be a US-built F-16 flew over the island at just 200m.

Witnesses said that during the two-hour incident the people of Baoknana were terrified, with some fleeing into the hills.

“People could smell smoke and fumes from the gunfire and were very concerned about possible poisoning from the gases,” the report said.

While the report does not identify the type of warship involved, Indonesia has three classes of frigate capable of carrying an armed helicopter.

The most likely culprit was one of six ex-Dutch built frigates based on the British Leander class.

According to diplomats, several motives could lie behind the display of firepower, but Jakarta's determination not to lose any more territory is the most likely explanation.

Indonesia has built four houses on the disputed island to accommodate lighthouse workers, according to West Timor military commander Colonel M. Moesanip.

Col. Moesanip confirmed the navy exercise was carried out to assert sovereignty on the island