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Indonesia flexes military muscle in border dispute with East Timor

Where Is International Reaction?

The East Timor Action Network (ETAN) today urged the United Nations and United States to strongly condemn Indonesia's use of military force in a territorial dispute with East Timor. ETAN called on Indonesia to negotiate claims through normal diplomatic channels according to international law. Indonesia recently bombed a small contested island to establish its claim.

"Unless the U.S., UN and other nations take a strong stance now, East Timor's border will remain volatile and real security a distant dream for the long-suffering East Timorese," said John M. Miller, spokesperson for ETAN. "The world must act to prevent Indonesia from chipping away at East Timor's sovereignty."

"Indonesia should sit down with East Timor and negotiate conflicting claims in good faith, rather than unilaterally assert them through military force," added Miller. "We fear that without strong international involvement, Indonesia will not do this."

"There remain a large number of land disputes along the border, particularly involving the enclave of Oecussi. Will the world stand by when Indonesia asserts those claims militarily?" asked Miller. "The UN must remain active in pursuing negotiated solutions to any disagreements. Both nations must be willing to use international mechanisms such as the World Court if necessary."

The Indonesian military (TNI) plans to permanently deploy troops on the uninhabited island called Fatu Sinai by East Timor and Pulau Batek by Indonesia.

Australian newspapers described a UN report on a December 14 Indonesian military exercise in which a "camouflaged helicopter bearing Indonesian markings fired a missile into the disputed outcrop... before a warship pounded the tiny uninhabited island with heavy gunfire." Two hours later an Indonesian fighter jet, believed to be a U.S.-built F-16, flew just above the island.

"The U.S. government should strongly protest the use of U.S.-supplied military equipment in this hostile act against East Timor," said Miller.

The coral island lies five kilometers off the western edge of East Timor's Oecussi enclave, which is surrounded on three sides by Indonesian West Timor and is especially vulnerable. Fatu Sinai has special spiritual significance to people of Oecussi; its bombing is seen as deeply offensive.

Border negotiations between East Timor, represented by the UN prior to independence, and Indonesia began in September 2000. East Timor has called for a demilitarized border and has only placed police there. However, Indonesia maintains 1 500 soldiers along the border.

East Timor's leadership has called for extending the UN security presence once the current UN peacekeeping mission ends in May. UN peacekeepers withdrew from Oecussi in October 2003 as part of a planned draw-down of UN forces.

The East Timor Action Network/U.S. supports sovereignty and human dignity for the people of East Timor and Indonesia by advocating for democracy, economic justice and human rights.

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