



Submission No 95

Inquiry into Australia's Relations with Indonesia

Organisation: Oxfam, Community Aid Abroad

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Janet Holmes,
Secretary,
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade,
Parliament House,
Canberra, 2600
28 April 2003

Dear Janet;

Building Australia's Relationship with Indonesia

Thank you for your letter of 24 March 2003 enclosing the transcript of evidence given to the above committee by James Ensor and myself.

During the course of our evidence, I agreed to provide further information to the committee outlining our position on the future of Australian troops currently undertaking peace keeping duties in the Indonesia and Timor Leste border region after the expiry of the current mandate in June 2004.

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad remains concerned by recent security incidents, (January 2003), along the Timor Leste/Indonesia border. We believe this reflects what Kofi Annan referred to on 3 March 2003 in response to a cutback proposal, as "the fragility of what has been achieved." We therefore ask that any proposed cutbacks in troop numbers should be considered in this light.

As Mr Annan also pointed out, there is a clear danger that cutbacks in the UN peacekeeping proposed for June and December 2003 would mean that the downsizing had progressed beyond the point of no return and the security environment may quickly deteriorate. At the same time Oxfam Community Aid Abroad accepts the need for developing Timor Leste's law enforcement capacity but we do not accept that this should be at the expense of viable border protection.

This position is based on three points:

Firstly, it is only the presence of independent military presence on the border which allows an accurate judgement as to the real causes of the violence - without them the claims that

the Indonesian backed incursions were the main cause of violence might have gained more public currency and caused a far more serious dispute between RDTL and Indonesia.

Secondly, many militia leaders responsible for the violence in 1999 remain in West Timor and - in the absence of an effective judicial process - are free to pursue their revanchist aims. While this situation continues, violent incursion remains a possibility.

Thirdly, whatever the duration of the PKF and policing support and the balance between the two elements must be decided in close consultation with the RDTL authorities. It is vital that their needs and concerns are central to the decision.

Australia should be willing to commit appropriate peace keeping resources if Timor Leste deem them necessary beyond the expiry of the current mandate in June 2004. Having come this far in its support of East Timor it is important that the Australian Government acts to ensure that these achievements are lasting.

In our view it would be preferable for the force to be maintained under an extended UN mandate. Given the political sensitivities of the situation neither Timor Leste, nor Indonesia itself would be likely to accept an alternative tri-partite arrangement for broader security, as raised by a member of the Committee. It may in fact undermine recent progress in rebuilding Australia Indonesia relationships after the events of 1999.

Finally, we would like to point out once again the significance of a stable and secure Timor Leste to Australia's regional strategic interests. Such continuing public commitment to border stability would help not only regional security but help underpin a national environment within which Timor Leste can pursue its legitimate development goals.

Yours sincerely



Malcolm Reid

Advocacy Manager

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