

Life and death in the mountains of Timor-Leste: the case of Ponta Leste

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Introduction

In this paper, I offer recollections of the period, from 1975 to 1978 – from the time of the Indonesian invasion of the territory of East-Timor in December 1975 to the ‘surrender’¹ of the civilian population on Mount Matebian in November 1978. I will focus on Sector Ponta Leste, the Sector where I was based, with FRETILIN, from 1975 to early 1979. Under FRETILIN (Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente – The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East-Timor), the territory of East-Timor was divided into seven Sectors. These were Sector Ocidental, Sector Fronteira Norte, Sector Fronteira Sul, Sector Centro Norte, Sector Centro Sul, Sector Centre Leste and Sector Ponta Leste.²

Sector Ponta Leste included the eastern parts of the regions of Baucau and Viqueque and the whole region of Lospalos. The western parts of Baucau and Viqueque were part of Sector Centro Leste. FRETILIN had also put in place, in all Sectors, a political and administrative structure made up of Comitês Regionais and Comitês das Zonas (For further details, see Cabral, 2002). These Comitês functioned as local administrative bodies replacing the Portuguese administrative structures.

In addition, FRETILIN had established a military structure, albeit on a very small scale. In 1975 most of FALINTIL (Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste – The Armed Forces for the National Liberation of Timor-Leste), the armed wing of FRETILIN, were operating on the border with Indonesia. However, the military structure was already in place and worked side by side with the Party’s local leadership.

The Indonesian invasion

On December 7, 1975, Timor-Leste was invaded from air, sea and land, by Indonesian forces. They landed in Dili, the capital. Two days later, they also bombarded Baucau. They dropped paratroopers there and occupied the airport (Budiardjo and Liong 1984; Taylor 1991). The bombardment also came from the sea. I remember very clearly that, in Baucau, the withdrawing FALINTIL forces were involved in intense combat with invaders for a few hours before moving further inland.

I must emphasise here that, as they withdrew inland, FALINTIL members, were well received by local populations. These included people who usually lived in the different areas and people who had already been evacuated. In the early days and weeks of the invasion, there was ample food available for the FALINTIL forces and for civilians.

As the occupation of Baucau began to take hold, most of the population living in the city and its suburbs were evacuated inland. Some moved towards the west of Baucau and others towards the east. During the evacuation they took with them whatever belongings they could: a few clothes, food and livestock. The evacuation took place in distressing circumstances. For example, in the mêlée and the chaos some family members got separated since they fled to different Sectors. Some were taken by the Indonesians and others simply lost their lives.

Once the full scale invasion of the whole territory had taken place, FALINTIL members who were in different parts of Timor-Leste, (e.g. in Dili or on the border with West-Timor) began to return ‘home’, to their places of origin. Most of them had served in the Portuguese army and most were based in Dili, Aileu, Ermera, Bobonaro or Maubisse and in all places where there had been Portuguese military bases. Alongside the former Portuguese army combatants based on the border with West Timor, there were also men from Uato-Lari, Viqueque and Baucau areas. These men had gone to Dili before the war, to work for Chinese merchants, in the coffee industry. In Dili, they had supported FRETILIN and had fought against UDT in the aftermath of the UDT coup. When the threat of the invasion was looming, they

¹ I have put ‘surrender’ in scare quotes here since many of the civilians went on to work within the clandestine resistance.

² See the CAVR Report, Volume 1, Part 5 of *Chega!* p.421 for details of the districts included. I have included in my list the Sector based in Oé-Cusse (Sector Ocidental). This is sometimes omitted from other lists.

had gone to the border with West Timor and joined FALINTIL. This group of combatants were known, at the time, as ‘militia.’³ After the full-scale invasion of the territory, these men also returned to their places of origin.

As these different groups of combatants arrived in their places of origin, they began to put their own structures in place, liaising with the broader leadership of FALINTIL. Initially, they were relatively few in number and so they only served as a buffer and mounted their military posts between the population and the enemy. But, the numbers in their ranks began to increase as FALINTIL recruited and trained civilians for combat. Moreover, they soon had a different structure altogether. The buffers came to be known as *Companhias do Sector*, (CS). They also organised what were known as *Estafetas*, to carry letters to and from the different *Companhias*. Later on, the structure became a bit more sophisticated. For example, the FALINTIL leadership created *Companhias das Forças de Intervenção* (FI) and *Companhias de Choque* (KC) (see Cabral 2002). The two latter forces were concentrated forces and were stationed in specific areas in order to support each other and the CS. The KC was more of an elite force and, in principle, if they acted, it was to eliminate the enemy.⁴ For example, if the enemy overpowered a CS, the FI was supposed to go and support them. If the FI could not do this then the KC would act.

After the Indonesian army had taken control of Baucau, the second city of Timor-Leste, they began to move southwards, in the direction of Viqueque, as well as eastwards towards Laga and Quelicai. Later on, when the Indonesian troops took over Lospalos, the population there also moved westwards towards Mount Matebian. Initially, the Indonesians were moving along the existing roads. This meant that the civilians moved into areas where access by vehicles was impossible

Since so many civilians were displaced from the areas of their origin and were concentrated in small pockets of land away from the roads, the local and regional Committees of FRETILIN began to organise the production of food through *Cooperativas*. They also recruited and trained nurses. These nurses went on to provide some health care, not only for the civilians but also for FALINTIL members who were wounded. In Ponta Leste, as in other Sectors, the regional Committee also began a political campaign, explaining why people should join the FRETILIN and its armed forces and resist the Indonesian invasion. This political campaign would have a very positive effect years later, since it sowed the seeds of nationalism within the wider population.

The impact of the continued assaults and bombardments by the Indonesian forces

Apart from constant bombardments from sea and air, the Indonesians would, from time to time, carry out full-scale assaults on places where the population had taken refuge. These assaults usually inflicted heavy casualties on civilians. Moreover, some of the civilians were captured and taken under the control of Indonesian troops. After assaults like this, the Indonesian army would burn down every hut and all crops, before leaving the area, and they would kill all the livestock, which they could not take with them. Burning crops and killing livestock was a means to prevent people who had escaped or been captured to return to their former homes and harvest crops or retrieve these live stock. In the long term, the main aim was to starve people as a form of punishment should they decide not to surrender or should they provide support for FALINTIL and FRETILIN members (e.g. by feeding them). Every time, this happened, the local FRETILIN leadership evacuated the local population even further in land for their own safety.

It is important to point out that, in 1975, the vast majority of the population was living off the land. They were engaged in subsistence farming. Very few East-Timorese worked in the Portuguese colonial administration. As the FRETILIN activists, FALINTIL forces and civilians moved further inland, and as people abandoned the land that they were cultivating, food began to run out. Every time they arrived in a new place, they started to use the land that was not used by local people to cultivate new crops. Often they used the seeds that they had taken with them to plant new crops. This further diminished the supply of food, since one part had to be set aside to consume and the other to invest in the development of new crops.⁵ However, after a few months, the enemy attacks intensified and people had to be evacuated

³ It is important to acknowledge here that the term ‘militia’ had been used for a short while during FRETILIN’s fight against UDT (União Democrática de Timor – The Democratic Union of Timor)

⁴ It has to be said that until Matebian fell on November 22nd, 1978 the KC never acted. There was a national equivalent known as *Brigada de Choque*.

⁵ See also Chapter 4 of the CAVR report.

yet further inland, abandoning whatever they had cultivated. Once people had fled or had been evacuated from a particular place, they could not return. The place became dangerous to be seen around and, as I have indicated above, the enemy had destroyed the crops.

One enduring memory I have of the years I spent in Ponta Leste is that of the time when the food supplies were becoming very scarce. The supply of water was also dwindling and people had to walk very long distances to fetch water. By this time, civilians who had fled or had been evacuated from many areas of the territory - from parts of Viqueque, Ossú, Venilale, Baucau and Laga and almost of Lospalos - had reached a half-way point up Mount Matebian. Moreover, as in most places throughout Timor-Leste, even before the war, food supplies were in scarce supply during the rainy season (November to February or March). The combination of war and lack of food had dire consequences. With so many people being concentrated in one specific area, diseases spread and there were severe problems with malnutrition. This in turn caused loss of life. The Timorese civilians who were behind the lines in Ponta Leste at this time felt the full brunt of these problems.

It took almost two more years for the evacuated population to reach the top of mount Matebian. Along the way, they engaged in various activities, which were planned by FRETILIN such as the running of cooperatives, cultural events and adult literacy classes (Cabral and Martin-Jones 2002; Da Silva 2012). At the same time, the Indonesian forces continued to put pressure on people to surrender. Sporadic military assaults were carried out. The Indonesian also set up a network of spies within the Resistance to inform on the activities and whereabouts of FALINTIL and FRETILIN leaders. Air strikes were also stepped up, though it has to be said that FALINTIL combatants suffered relatively few casualties. The main casualties occurred in areas where the civilians were concentrated (see Budiardjo and Liong 1984; Dunn 1983 and Taylor 1991). Usually, FALINTIL members positioned themselves at some distance away from the areas where the vast majority of the civilian population was concentrated. It was also very rare for FALINTIL bases to be assaulted. The enemy knew that these bases were well guarded. But they also knew that constant intimidation would eventually force the civilians to surrender. The most difficult moment came once civilian population had reached the top of Mount Matebian. People from parts of Baucau and Viqueque, and many from Lospalos, were now all concentrated on the top of the mountain. In this location, they were an easy target for the Indonesian army to carry out their military activities. People had to walk for miles during the night in search of food and water. They were particularly vulnerable to attacks and to the nightly bombardments.

A full scale military operation was carried out on three fronts: land, air and sea. On land, battalion after battalion marched towards Matebian from the east and west. From the sea, war ships unleashed their military might from Laga. And, from the air, the Indonesian military forces struck in three different ways: Sky Hawks fired with deadly accuracy; they were also accompanied by other planes which dropped bombs in the areas where the population was concentrated. And, amongst these planes were those that were known among the Timorese as 'supersonic planes'. They travelled so fast that we only heard them after they had passed over. By October and November 1978, the casualties from bombardments, by day and night, had reached their height. People were burying their dead on a daily basis. Many were killed by shrapnel from mortars, canon or bombs. Others died of starvation.⁶ The FRETILIN leadership was now under enormous pressure. Finally, on November 22 1978, the leadership decided to recommend to the civilian population on Matebian that they should leave the area.⁷ This was the end of resistance by FRETILIN, and its armed wing FALINTIL, in areas where the population was concentrated.

However, the suffering of the population continued once they had surrendered to the enemy in villages nearby. The Indonesian army had put in place strategic hamlets, similar to ones created in Vietnam during the war there, and the population was relocated to these hamlets. There was restricted movement and tight surveillance in these hamlets. People also experienced severe food shortages and ill health. This caused immense suffering, particularly among the elderly, and among women and children. The International Red Cross attempted to supply some food, but most of the time, this did not reach the people in the strategic hamlets for whom it was destined. This food ended up in the hands of corrupt Indonesian soldiers who sold it on. The people in the hamlets could not afford the prices they set.

⁶ See testimonies in the CAVR report for further details.

⁷ See Xanana Gusmão's statements, (e.g. in Gusmão 1994), as to why they recommended that the population should surrender and also his reflections on the evacuation of the population towards Matebian.

Concluding reflections

The full horrors of the invasion, of the gradual encirclement of the population behind the lines and the sheer scale of the war crimes committed against Timorese people by the Indonesian military forces have now been well documented (e.g. Budiardjo and Liong 1984; CAVR 2005; Dunn 1983; Taylor 1991). So has the resilience and determination of the East-Timorese in defending their nation throughout the long years of the Indonesian occupation (Fernandes 2011; Hainsworth and McCloskey 2000). Now, forty years on, so much has changed. The Indonesian troops were forced to withdraw in 1999 after the historic vote in favour of Independence, and Independence was finally restored in 2002. However, we must never forget the thousands of Timorese who underwent such suffering and, in particular, those who lost their lives during the brutal assaults and bombardment of Mount Matebian.

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