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## East Timor's commander seeks parliamentary inquiry

By John Loizou

Dili, November 20: The legendary role Brigadier General Taur Matan Ruak, 50, played in the 24-year struggle to end Indonesia's occupation of his country – his commitment, integrity, organisational skills and leadership – means that although a Protestant, he commands the respect of most of the Republic's about one million mostly Roman Catholic citizens.

It means also that if the speech of the diminutive man whose name in his native Tetum means "to look at the world with both eyes" and commands the 1,100 men and women of East Timor's army is gracious and low, his words have the resonance of thunder.

And when I met him at his barracks just outside Dili, where he and his well-disciplined army retreated to their barracks in accordance with instructions after the violence of April and May- including fighting between soldiers and police - that prompted the reintroduction of an Australian-led force of soldiers and police to re-establish the rule of law in the newly-independent country, he was determined that the world should hear his message.

He was not anti-Australian.

"I fought Indonesia for 24 years without being anti-Indonesian," he said. "So why would I now be anti-Australian? "I have never seen a people more generous than the Australians.

"When in 1975 – after the Indonesian invasion – our people ran away to Australia it was the Australian people who supported them as refugees.

"It was Australians who lobbied to help ensure East Timor got its share of the resources from the Timor Sea."

But the Brigadier General, who was responding to media reports that some East Timorese had complained about the behaviour of the Australian soldiers and his belief that international troops could not settle the crisis, was less sanguine about the behaviour of the Australian government. Only the Australian government had recognised Indonesia's annexation of East Timor, he said. Now that same government has to deal with an East Timor that has been independent for just four years.

"It is for the Australian Government a new experience: Dealing with a new people and a new nation and it would have to learn how it is done.

"But we recognize that both Indonesia and Australia are our neighbours and you can choose your friends but you have to live with your neighbours," he said.

The Brigadier General had other views to emphatically express. He wants East Timor's Parliament to make a thorough investigation of the midyear violence that destabilised his country to "determine the political objectives and strategies" of those responsible - the intellectuals who were its direct and indirect authors.

Would he name them?

That was for the Parliament, he said. "But I still want it to be done. It's a clear objective and we will push for it even if it takes another 20 years and I'm 70." Nor was he satisfied with the work done by the three-man commission appointed by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan to investigate the violence. The commission's task had been to determine the facts and circumstances of the eruption but it had failed to do so. Their report had failed to take into consideration the political context of the crisis and that is why he is calling for a parliamentary investigation that would consider these facts when assessing the events that took place during the crisis.

"An example was May 25 when nine policemen were killed and more than 20 injured, some by my soldiers," he said. The Commissioners had identified the soldiers but had failed to apportion any blame to the United Nations officials who had put the police at risk. And although all the arms held by the army had been accounted more than 200 weapons issued to the police, including pistols and long-range rifles, were still missing.

Yet the three UN commissioners had not recommended any investigation of the police – with the exception of former Interior Minister Rogario Lobato – while they had proposed investigation of former Defence Minister Roque Rodrigues, himself and almost the entire army leadership.

They had also failed to state clearly that an allegation regarding the existence of three containers with supposedly illegally imported weapons was false. “It sometimes makes me think that the UN wants to break up our army” he said.

Had it been difficult for him and his army not to declare martial law as the violence unfolded, I asked. After all it was not the first time his soldiers had been forced to watch their capital being destroyed?

“We returned to our barracks because we were requested to do so,” he said.

“We are the gentlest army in the world. There are no other forces in the world that would have done what we did.

“They fired at my house and looted it and put my two children at risk.

“Yet we obeyed our orders.

“When New York was attacked on September 11 two countries - Afghanistan and Iraq - were invaded.

“When two Israeli soldiers were captured, Lebanon was destroyed.”

“What was more hurtful was the effort to dishonour us. Some of the accusations by foreigners, some by our own countrymen.”

So what of the future?

“The armed forces are always ready to act in accordance with our laws,” he said.

“It’s a small army and some consider it not to be a regular army but it had fought a 24-

year of war against one of the most professional forces in the world - the Indonesian army.

East Timor's caretaker Prime Minister, Jose Ramos-Horta has warned deserters Major Alfredo Reinado Alves and Vicente "Railos" da Conceicao, who are suspected of still holding weapons to surrender them or face dire consequences. The arrest of "Railos" was for the police, Brigadier General Taur Matan Ruak said. He believed that the Australian-trained Major Reinado who deserted on May 4 2006 and later escaped from prison on August 30 was dangerous.

"He is in possession of illegal weapons, he said.

"But Major Reinado understands that the use of violence will also cost him dearly. It's essential that the rule of law and order is implemented in this country."

So was it possible that Brigadier General Taur Matan Ruak would seek election as President of East Timor next year?

"I've devoted 31 years of my life to my country," he replied.

"I'm prepared to do whatever it demands of me."