

Situationer from Dili

By Robert Boughton

DILI, 7 December 2006.

Today in Timor-Leste is a public holiday, commemorating the December 7th 1975 invasion by Indonesia. Driving around the city, the streets are much less busy than on a normal working day. Along the beach front, parents are watching the children play in waters that, thirty one short years ago, literally ran with blood. A small ceremony opposite Motael Church is attended by dignitaries, police and members of F-FDTL, and some medals are handed out. But the atmosphere is subdued.

I've been back in Dili only five days, after an absence of nearly two months. A kind of peace has returned, and life appears almost normal. Businesses are flourishing, market stalls are busy, traffic is much more chaotic - there are so many more UN vehicles than there were a month ago. The UN police presence is everywhere, white Landcruisers travelling back and forth along the major streets. The refugee camps are still highly visible, at the airport, opposite the UN compound, in the grounds of some churches and some NGOs. But they have far fewer people in them, an effect of the government's policy of encouraging return through both community mediation and the reduction of food relief. There is still talk of an impending humanitarian crisis, if the rains come and turn the camps into a floodplain; but until today, thankfully, the rains have held off. Not so good for comfort outside the air-conditioned offices; but better than an epidemic of dengue fever or cholera which would quickly kill many of the most vulnerable still in the camps, young children and the frail aged.

Most schools are now open and operating, as is the university, and the Non-Formal Education Centre where I am based most days. So yes, in a sense, things appear to be returning to normal.

But the violence is still out there, and the fear which accompanies it. Four people have died in street gang fights just since last Sunday. In the chilling terrorist style that these killings can take, one young man had his ears and tongue cut out. Another was killed in front of the family who raised him, after the gang had burnt their house and the one next door. Another died in hospital, of injuries sustained from a vicious beating. The groups which do these crimes are called martial arts groups. While these latest killings are said to be part of a cycle of revenge, not directly political, the gangs themselves were mobilised in the political violence that began in April, when they were paid to create trouble and fed drugs. Perhaps their political masters no longer give the orders, but they are the ones who set the cycle of violence in train. Why are the leaders of these gangs, their political sponsors, and the people who financed them still not brought before the courts? This has been going on for seven months. Is the situation still too 'delicate'? Has the UN, which has assumed full control of the police, made some risk assessment that the low level violence is a price the people will have to pay for peace in the longer term?

The gang leaders and their political backers are not the only ones still at large. Major Reinado, the rebel leader who shot at loyalist troops in front of SBS cameras, is still at large, three months after his 30th August escape from Becora Prison. Not only is he at large; he gives interviews to local and international media, turns up at traditional ceremonies proclaimed to be about building peace, and attends peace seminars where he is photographed with Australian troops.

Prime Minister Horta, who owes his position to the political crisis Reinado's mutiny helped to precipitate, comments every other day on this situation, each time with a different explanation. Reinado should be arrested immediately; he will be arrested soon; his arrest is a matter for the military; he is still at large because his capture might cost the loss of more lives; he should surrender; his case is in the hands of the Ministry of Justice.

So it goes, in a succession of press releases and media conferences organised by an Australian-funded team of spin doctors. Many people are becoming cynical of these non-explanations, and the constant stream of self-serving media releases emanating from the PM's office. This is a style of political media management familiar in Australia, but only seen in Timor-Leste since the crisis began.

Meanwhile, the man that Horta deposed as PM, FRETILIN Secretary-General Mari Alkatiri, comments wryly that, months after he was removed, supposedly to end the violence, it continues; and while the real perpetrators of the coup are still at large, the only people cooperating with the justice system are the innocent targets of the coup's propagandists. FRETILIN President, Lu-Olo, who is also President of the Parliament, is more direct, pointing out that Reinado and his armed gang are there to intimidate FRETILIN supporters in the lead up to the next election.

The defections from the army, the armed clashes, the collapse of the police force, the removal of Alkatiri, the political and gang violence, and the subsequent impunity enjoyed by the rebel soldiers and police, all contribute to one outcome - reducing the chances that FRETILIN will be returned at the next election with a majority sufficient to continue to govern in their own right, as they did before the coup. The opposition parties who led the street demonstrations in favour of the army deserters and against Alkatiri in May and June; the people who alleged massacres by loyalist troops and a container load of missing weapons, neither of which could be verified by the UN Special Investigation team; the conservative Church leaders who attacked Alkatiri and the secular and socially progressive FRETILIN program - they will be among the beneficiaries if a so-called 'national unity' government is forced upon the country. The constant talk of 'dialogue' and 'justice' and 'national unity' may be well-intentioned in the mouths of some; but for the coup plotters and their national and international backers, these are weasel words. In the name of peace, a cover story is woven to disguise the removal by violence of a democratically-elected progressive nationalist government, which had the gall to stand up against powerful minority interests in its own country and the major powers in the region.

Will the coup succeed? Thirty one years ago, the first FRETILIN government faced up against a military invasion sent to overthrow it by one of the world's biggest countries. No one gave them a chance. The people predicting their demise now, or worse still, actively working for it, should learn from history. This is no ordinary party, and the people who elected them are no ordinary people. On Tuesday, I saw 500 militants fill the FRETILIN hall to welcome Alkatiri back from overseas. This was a meeting in that tradition its detractors call 'old-fashioned' - organised, passionate, disciplined, and committed. Like many other FRETILIN functions I have seen in the last few years, it was representative of the whole society, from top to bottom - Cabinet Ministers and ex-guerrilla fighters mixing easily and warmly with young men and women not even born in 1975.

It brought to mind the slogan I first heard in the darkest days following the 1975 invasion: "FRETILIN will win".