

Timor-Leste Democracy Support Network

MEDIA RELEASE

March 4, 2007

Capture of Reinado rebel group in Timor Leste

Today's long-overdue Australian military operation to capture and disarm the group of rebel soldiers and police led by Major Alfredo Reinado is another trauma for the Timorese people, but a major step forward for democracy and the prospects of peaceful development.

The Timor Leste Democracy Support Network, an Australian support group for constitutional rule and respect for elections in Timor Leste, welcomed the Australian military action to capture Reinado's group and urged that Reinado and his fellow rebels be brought before a properly constituted court as soon as possible.

"This military action is belated, but will at last help restore the rule of law in Timor Leste," said Peter Murphy, a spokesperson for the Network. "The Howard government has insisted that its military forces in Timor remain under its own command, and not under the command of the United Nations or of the Timor Leste government. Therefore the Howard government is responsible for the failure to disarm and detain Major Reinado and Commander Rai'los in June last year, the failure to keep Reinado in Becora Jail last August, and the failure to recapture him until now".

Major Reinado's actions since May 4, 2006 have aimed at overthrowing the elected FRETILIN government and changing the country's Constitution to ensure that the prime ministerial system is changed to an executive presidential system.

Supporting Major Reinado in Same this last week were two other key players in last May's attempted coup – Lieutenant Gastao Salsinha and independent MP Leandro Isaac. Salsinha and Isaac were disarmed and put under the control of Australian soldiers – but not arrested - this morning. Reports indicate that Major Reinado may be wounded and holding out in a tourist resort in the town.

"We continue our call for the arrest of Reinado, Isaac and Salsinha because of their joint role in the rebellion in Same," said Peter Murphy.

When news of the military operation reached Dili around midnight, Reinado supporters attacked and burned the warehouse and vehicles of the Department of Education, youth gangs went on a stoning rampage, chanting 'Viva Reinado' and there were widespread reports of gunfire as the UN police force moved to reassert control.

Major Reinado spelt this out his political goals in the Dili opposition newspaper, *Suara Timor Lorosae* last week: "He accused those who want the elections to go ahead as 'traitors who would easily forget the needs of the people once they are in power',

claiming that the military political crisis should be resolved before stepping into elections. He is of the opinion that elections should be postponed and the priority should be on resolving the crisis and then holding a referendum on the Constitution and the type of government that the people see suitable for the country”.

In an interview given to *The Bulletin* on February 28, 2007, Alfredo Reinado repeated his absurd claims of June last year that the FRETILIN government is ‘communist’ and that he was therefore fully justified in taking up arms to fight it.

Surrounded by Australian troops in Same, in the mountains south of Dili, Reinado abused the Howard government and the current Timorese Prime Minister Jose Ramos Horta, for talking to ‘the communists’ and also declared that President Xanana was ‘stupid’ for calling for his arrest.

The Australian media continue to promote Reinado as a ‘folk hero’, but he was not welcome in Same, where village leaders asked him to leave, and set up their own roadblocks to stop any Reinado supporters entering the area from outside. His repeated threats to shoot Australian troops should cause a reassessment in the Australian media.

It is so ironic that Reinado’s brazen outburst coincides with the evidence given in the NSW Coroner’s inquest into the death of cameraman Brian Peters at Balibo on October 16, 1975. That evidence indicates that the Indonesian military responsible considered Peters and the four other media workers to be “Australian communists”. The Indonesian military executed over one million civilians in 1965-66 in an anti-communist purge.

Reinado was raised as a boy in Kalimantan by an Indonesian soldier, and in 2005 received Australian Staff College training. His wife worked at the US Embassy in Dili, as manager of the Peace Corps, until the violent incident of April 28-30 last year

On March 1, independent MP Leandro Isaac was in Same, speaking to the media on behalf of the increasingly desperate Reinado. He reinforced the message that Reinado would not surrender but that he wanted to ‘negotiate and dialogue’, presumably about his political demands.

Leandro Isaac took part in the armed attack on the home of the Timorese Army commander, Brigadier General Taur Matan Ruak on May 24, 2006, according to the UN special investigation report. SBS TV’s *Dateline* reporter David O’Shea phoned Leandro Isaac for help when caught in the crossfire between Major Reinado’s group and government soldiers on May 23 last year.

The UN Independent Special Commission of Inquiry reported on Mr Isaac’s role in the attempted coup last year, on page 33-34 of its report issued in October 2006:

69. At about 8 a.m. on 24 May the F-FDTL protection unit stationed at the residence of Brigadier General Ruak observed about 10 PNTL officers, including Deputy Commander Abilio Mesquita, close to the house. All the PNTL officers were armed with Steyr weapons except Mr. Mesquita, who carried an F2000 fully automatic machine gun. Later in the morning the armed PNTL officers were seen even closer to the house. Mr. Mesquita then gave a hand signal which precipitated gunfire from his group directed against the house. The resulting exchange of fire continued until around 5 p.m. At about midday, the F-FDTL protection unit moved to the primary school situated above the house in order to gain a better vantage point. One of the PNTL officers was killed by a soldier about 30 minutes later. The soldiers, who were armed with M16 weapons and rifle-propelled grenades, then came under heavy automatic weapons fire from the east. They responded

with heavy fire, including the launching of several grenades, and were reinforced by FFDTL soldiers throughout the day.

70. During the afternoon of 24 May Brigadier General Ruak telephoned Member of Parliament Leandro Isaac, who passed the telephone to Abilio Mesquita. Both Mr. Isaac and Commander Mesquita live near General Ruak. Mr. Isaac was armed with a Steyr weapon and at least three men armed variously with Steyr and FN-FNC semi-automatic weapons were present. The Brigadier General requested that the shooting cease to allow his children to be evacuated from the house. The Ruak children were taken to safety during a ceasefire on the evening of 24 May. The exchange of fire between the PNTL officers under the command of Commander Mesquita and FFDTL recommenced on the morning of 25 May and continued until about 5 p.m.

The UN report further investigation of the role of Leandro Isaac in the violent events of May 24.

Lt Salsinha was the leader of the 'petitioning soldiers' whose strike in February helped to spark the political crisis. His group participated in the armed attack on the Timor army headquarters on May 24, 2006. His group also attacked the peaceful political rally of 3,000 FRETILIN supporters in Gleno, Ermera District, on February 17, 2007.

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