

“If You Leave Us Here We Will Die”: *How Genocide Was Stopped in East Timor*

By Geoffrey Robinson. Princeton University Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Jessica N. Trisko

THE WIDE VARIATION IN THE response of the international community to recent episodes of state violence throughout the Middle East and North Africa has brought renewed attention to the uncertain role of international actors in stopping ongoing violence against civilians. When it does occur, international intervention can take a variety of forms, ranging from mediated negotiations and unarmed observation missions to full-scale military operations. Among the instances of success in stopping state-led killings, such as Libya and Kosovo, there are, unfortunately, many examples of failure, such as Rwanda and Bosnia. The history of Timor-Leste – also known as East Timor – is unique in that it provides examples of both the failure and success of outside actors in influencing the course of violence on the ground. The international community turned a blind eye to the widespread killings in East Timor in the late 1970s, which followed a military intervention by Indonesia. The UN eventually succeeded in ending state-led violence by providing the East Timorese with a framework for achieving national independence, and engaging in what was “by any reasonable standard . . . an unusually quick and effective intervention” in September 1999.¹

At first glance, there is little reason to think that East Timor can provide answers to contemporary questions regarding if and when international intervention is justified. East Timor is a small and strategically unimportant country. With a territory slightly larger than the state of Connecticut, the country’s population of about one million inhabits the eastern half of an island it shares with Indonesia, which currently boasts a population of about 240 million. Yet the history of East Timor parallels many aspects of the events leading to a potential military intervention in Syria. The December 1975 invasion of East Timor by Indonesia occurred in the context of a Timorese civil war that pitted multiple political factions against one another, and which generated tens of thousands of refugees.² The UN reports that over 200,000 refugees have fled Syria as of August 2012.³ The dominant faction, *Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente* (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) claimed Portuguese-

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trained forces of approximately 2,500 troops and 7,000 militia.⁴ The size of the Free Syrian Army has yet to be established. Calls for intervention by "international forces, designated from one or more countries in the area" came from locals as well as Portugal, East Timor's colonial master.⁵ The Indonesian intervention succeeded in ending the Timorese civil war but did so largely by refocusing the attention of armed groups against the invading Indonesian troops, which eventually reached 32,000 in number.⁶

Despite ending the civil war, the legacy of the Indonesian intervention was a perpetual debate over the legitimacy of the country's July 17, 1976 annexation of East Timor. The occupation and political incorporation of East Timor into Indonesian territory left the international community in a quandary: to recognize the *de facto* integration of East Timor through force, or to take a stand in the face of ongoing violence and the violation of international law. Major players in the region, such as the United States and Australia, chose the former option, in part because of their complicity in the arms build-up that preceded the invasion.⁷ Countries that possess UN veto power, such as the United States, Russia, and China, continue to be pivotal in determining when international intervention occurs.⁸ On the other hand, the vast majority of UN members simply chose to ignore the problem by refusing to provide *de jure* recognition of East Timor's integration after an April 1976 UN Security Council resolution failed to bring about Indonesia's withdrawal.⁹ The uncertain position taken by many members of the international community created the political space for a group of concerned activists and local Timorese politicians to use human rights violations in the territory as a clarion call for East Timor's independence.

Following the resignation of the country's dictatorial and long-standing President Suharto in 1998 in the face of widespread popular protests, Portugal and Indonesia (under the leadership of former Indonesian Vice President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie) undertook discussions mediated by the UN, which led to the creation of a referendum on East Timor's future status.¹⁰ Thus the dispute over East Timor's status began and ended with the help of the UN. In June 1999, the UN Security Council established the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), and authorized 280 civilian police officers and fifty military liaisons to assist Indonesia in maintaining security in the run-up to the referendum.¹¹ The period between the establishment of UNTAET and the referendum was marred by violence but on May 20, 2002, Timor-Leste finally became an independent state after 300 years of foreign rule.

UCLA Professor Geoffrey Robinson's innovative history of political violence in East Timor examines both the international community's complicity in the Indonesian invasion as well as the positive role that the international community later played in helping East Timor achieve independence. His book, "*If You Leave Us Here We Will Die*": *How Genocide Was Stopped in East Timor*, has both a provocative title and content. While the best estimates of the deaths caused by the conflict (both direct, through violence, and indirect, through illness and starvation) number from approximately 103,000 to 150,000 over a period of about twenty-five years,¹² Robinson's decision to invoke the concept of genocide—defined as acts committed in time of peace or war with the intent to destroy in whole or part a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group¹³—in reference to East Timor is controversial. Little evidence has emerged that

the violence committed by members of the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, the Indonesian armed forces, was intended to systematically eliminate the local population.¹⁴ In fact, Robinson himself claims “there is no evidence that the Indonesian army commanders who planned the operations in East Timor intended to kill one-third of the population. Their principal aim was to quell resistance to their rule.”¹⁵ Robinson does, however, provide substantial evidence that East Timor’s Tetum-speaking Catholics were indelibly scarred by the Indonesian occupation.

While the vast majority of political violence in East Timor took place during the initial months of the Indonesian invasion, Robinson makes a strong argument that the resurgence of violence immediately before the 1999 referendum on East Timor’s independence cannot be understood apart from the history of state-society relations in Indonesia. Approximately 2,600 individuals died as a result of the violence in April and September of 1999.¹⁶ While the UN-sponsored referendum may explain the timing of this violence, Robinson contends that “a climate of impunity” among the Indonesian armed forces based on “a well-founded belief among officers and soldiers that they were beyond the reach of the law” created conditions “in which extreme violence was almost inevitable.”¹⁷ Such conditions often prevail in societies dominated by the military or other security sector institutions.

One among many of the reasons why the international community continued to pay attention to human rights abuses in East Timor was because of the efforts of Timorese exiles, members of the Catholic church, and concerned scholars—including Cornell Professor Benedict Anderson—who refused to let the plight of East Timor fall from memory. The fervency of their belief in the ability of the UN to rectify past wrongs is reflected in “*If You Leave Us Here We Will Die*.” Recounting his June 1999 arrival in East Timor’s capital city, Dili, Robinson writes, “Here, in a place that had been so vigorously closed off from the world community—and whose occupying authorities had so routinely scoffed at UN criticism and international law—the United Nations had finally established a meaningful presence.”¹⁸ My recent trip to Dili confirmed the enduring nature of the UN presence in East Timor in the form of newly created government institutions, embassies, and a plethora of UN vehicles.

Robinson’s work takes an original form, combining historical narrative with first person accounts of his own experiences on the ground as a Political Affairs Officer with UNTAET in 1999. Although Robinson’s first-hand knowledge sets his account of the 1999 violence in East Timor apart from other writing on the subject,¹⁹ and excels in capturing the uncertainty and confusion of the period, Robinson’s UN work also drives much of the book’s content. For example, he goes to great lengths to explain positions taken by the UN Political Affairs office regarding issues such as the timing of electoral registration in East Timor prior to the referendum. While this may be of some interest to those concerned with the internal politics of international governmental organizations such as the UN, the broader issue of how the UN mission influenced the violence, and was itself ultimately influenced by it, fails to receive sufficient treatment in Robinson’s account.

The combination of history and personal memoir makes for an interesting read, but it causes one to wonder whether some of Robinson’s conclusions are based on historical

evidence or personal opinion. This is especially true in Chapter Six when Robinson describes patterns of pro-Indonesia militia violence during the UNTAET mission. Robinson shifts back and forth from his singular voice "I" to a plural "we" which seems to encompass the approximately 800 international staff and volunteers that comprised UNTAET.²⁰ This blurring between first- and second- or even third-hand accounts detracts from the book's overall historical value, but seems necessary for Robinson to provide us with a holistic picture of on-the-ground developments in the early days of the referendum-related violence.

Both due to and in spite of Robinson's place within the historical narrative, this book is a rich and unique contribution to the study of East Timor, and political violence more generally. It draws on an array of material including historical archives, witness testimony, and personal observation. Robinson provides insight not only into the challenges that international interventions encounter on the ground, but also the importance of persevering in spite of these challenges. As the case of East Timor illustrates, international intervention is not always a boon. Unfortunately for the people of East Timor, it took more than two decades after the Indonesian intervention for the political conditions necessary for UN involvement to arise. Yet even after a UN presence was established and independence achieved, the country faced major episodes of political violence that prompted further UN intervention in the security sector. It is therefore essential that members of the international community act in concert to uphold the current consensus regarding "the right and responsibility to prevent egregious acts of violence by states against their citizens" by intervening when the appropriate conditions for success are in place and remaining committed until the outcomes of intervention are assured.²¹ Hopefully, any future international intervention in Syria or elsewhere will result in the development of political and social institutions that render state-led violence against civilians unthinkable. ■

NOTES

¹ Geoffrey Robinson. 2009. *If You Leave Us Here We Will Die: How Genocide was Stopped in East Timor*. Princeton University Press, 185.

² By November of 1975, the Indonesian government claimed that over 40,000 refugees had spilled over into the western half of the island of Timor, part of the Indonesian province of *Nusa Tenggara Timur*, requiring the government to spend about 100 million *rupiah* on their care. Republic of Indonesia, Department of Foreign Affairs. 1975. *The Question of Portuguese Timor*. Jakarta: The Department of Information, Republic of Indonesia, 24.

³ *Al Jazeera*. 2012. Syria refugee numbers 'surpass 200,000'. 25 August. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middle-east/2012/08/20128252237209782.html>.

⁴ The Portuguese colonial army (*Tropas*) had both local volunteers and conscripts, with all Timorese men required to do thirty days of military service. By the early 1970s, approximately 2,000 Timorese were serving in the colonial army with a "great many" deserting and joining the militias of political parties during decolonization. Robinson 2009, 25–26.

⁵ United Nations General Assembly. 1975. *Letter dated 23 August 1975 from the Charge d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Portugal to the United Nations addressed in the Secretary-General*. 25 August. A/10209 s/11313.

⁶ Notably, this dynamic is the mirror image of that which occurred with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In spite of the presence of approximately 130,000 active-duty US troops in Iraq in 2007, violence between Sunni and Shi'a factions in the country escalated to the level of a civil war and led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

⁷ Archival documents indicate that the United States, under the Ford administration, accepted the annexation of East Timor in part to obviate Foreign Assistance Act restrictions on the use of arms supplied by the United States through its foreign assistance programs. Furthermore, Simpson notes that at Australian officials took the April 1977 visit of a congressional delegation and Richard Holbrooke, then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, to Jakarta to imply *de*

- facto* US recognition of East Timor's integration into Indonesia. Bradley R. Simpson. 2009. "Denying the 'First Right': The United States, Indonesia, and the Ranking of Human Rights by the Carter Administration, 1976–1980." *The International History Review* Vol. 31, No. 4: 808. See also Robinson 2009, 234.
- ⁸ Russia has protected Syria from UN Security Council condemnation while the state-run Chinese and Russian media have been used to defend the actions of the Syrian government. BBC News. 2012. *Sergei Lavrov: Russia rejects use of force in Syria*. 9 June. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18384519>. BBC News. 2012. *How Russian and Chinese Media Justify Syrian Support*. 13 September. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18424991>.
- ⁹ United Nations Security Council. 1967. *By which the Council again called upon all States to respect the territorial integrity of East Timor and on Indonesia to withdraw its forces*. 22 April. S/RES/389.
- ¹⁰ United Nations Security Council. 1999. *By which the Council welcomed the conclusion of an Agreement between Indonesia and Portugal*. 7 May. S/RES/1236.
- ¹¹ United Nations Security Council. 1999. *By which the Council decided to establish until 31 August 1999 the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) to organize and conduct a popular consultation*. 11 June. S/RES/1246.
- ¹² Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor-Leste (CAVR). 2005. *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste*. Dili, Timor-Leste: CAVR. See also Ben Kiernan. 2003. "War, Genocide, and Resistance in East Timor, 1975–99: Comparative Reflections on Cambodia." in Mark Selden and Alvin Y. So, eds., *War and State Terror: The United States, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific in the Long Twentieth Century*. Lanham, MD: Routledge, 200.
- ¹³ UN General Assembly. 1948. *Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. 9 December 1948. A/RES/260.
- ¹⁴ Yale Professor of History Ben Kiernan also terms the Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor a genocide, citing use of the term by Xanana Gusmão, current Prime Minister and former President of East Timor and a major rebel leader. Kiernan 2003, 212.
- ¹⁵ Robinson 2009, 49. Furthermore, Robinson continues to argue that "what is most striking about the violence in East Timor is the almost complete absence of underlying ethnic or religious tensions prior to or even after 1975." Robinson 2009, 229.
- ¹⁶ The estimated error on this figure is +/- 626. CAVR 2005, Chapter 6, 3. See also, KPP-HAM. 2002. "Full Report of the Investigative Commission into Human Rights Violations in East Timor." in McDonald et al. *Masters of Terror: Indonesia's Military and Violence in East Timor in 1999*. Canberra, Australia: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 30.
- ¹⁷ Robinson 2009, 45.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.
- ¹⁹ Nevins also draws on his experience as part of the International Federation for East Timor Observer Project during the UN-run vote in East Timor. Nevins' account lacks much of the deep historical perspective found in Robinson's work because the discussion is largely situated in terms of US reaction to the events of 9/11. See Joseph Nevins. 2005. *A Not-So-Distant Horror: Mass Violence in East Timor*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- ²⁰ Robinson 2009, 117.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 244.