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We helped them descend into hell

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It had been a long night of waiting for the Indonesian troop convoy to pass. Two of us then crossed the border into East Timor clandestinely, through a forest of dead, petrified trees that appeared as silhouetted needles around which skeins of fine white sand drifted, like mist. As the sun rose, there stood the surreal crosses.

They were almost everywhere; great black crosses etched against the sky, crosses on peaks, crosses in tiers on the hillsides, crosses beside the road, overlooking white slabs. They littered the earth and crowded the eye. As we trudged through dense scrub, we came upon them: on a riverbank, an escarpment, commanding all before them. The inscriptions on some were normal: those of generations departed in proper time and sequence. However, the dates of these were all prior to 1975, when proper time and sequence ended. The majority revealed the extinction of whole families, wiped out in the space of a year, a month, a day: "RIP Mendoca, Crismina, 7.6.77 . . . Filismina . . . 7.6.77 . . . Ada- lino . . . 7.6.77 . . . Alisa . . . 7.6.77 . . . Rosa . . . 7.6.77 . . . Anita . . . 7.6.77."

I carried with me hand-drawn maps of other, unmarked graves where some of those murdered by Indonesian troops at the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre had been buried; I had no idea that so much of the country was a vast grave, marked by paths that ended abruptly, and fields inexplicably bulldozed, and earth inexplicably covered with tarmac, and villages that are not so much human entities as memorials.

Kraras is one of them. It is known as the "village of the widows", because the whole community of 287 people was slaughtered by the Indonesians. In a meticulous hand that carried on from a faded typewriter ribbon, a priest recorded the name, age, cause of death and date and place of the killing of every victim. In the last column, he identified the Indonesian battalion responsible for each murder. I have the document, which I always find difficult to put down, as if the blood of East Timor is fresh on its pages. Like the ubiquitous crosses, it records the Calvary of perhaps 40 families, among them the dos Anjos family.

In 1987, I interviewed Arthur ("Steve") Stevenson, a former Australian commando who had fought the Japanese in Timor. He told me the story of Celestino dos Anjos, whose ingenuity and courage had saved his life, and other Australian lives, behind Japanese lines - the kind of man to whom leaflets dropped by the Royal Australian Air Force were addressed, as the Australians retreated, leaving the Timorese to their fate. "We shall never forget you," the leaflets said.

In 1986, Steve Stevenson received a letter from Celestino's son, Virgillo, who was the same age as his own son. He wrote that his father had survived the Indonesian invasion in 1975, but he went on: "In August 1983, Indonesian forces entered our village, Kraras. They looted, burned and massacred, with fighter aircraft overhead. On 27 September 1983, they made my father and my wife dig their own graves and they machine-gunned them. My wife was pregnant." On the Kraras list, I found the name of Cacildo dos Anjos. The priest has recorded him as "aged 2 . . . shot". He was Celestino's grandson, the last to be executed.

The Kraras list is among my most valued possessions. Not only is it true evidence of genocide, it is an extraordinary political document that shames Indonesia's Faustian partners in the western democracies. The priest, whose name I shall not use because he may still be there, wrote on the final page the following appeal to the world: "The international community continues to miss the point in the case of East Timor. There is only one crime . . . To the capitalist governors of the world, Timor's petroleum smells better than Timorese blood and tears. It even seems as if the United Nations itself is easing the path of the aggressor, giving it the time and conditions necessary to execute the ethnic and cultural genocide of the Timorese people and, finally, declare that East Timor is definitely integrated into the Indonesian republic . . . Who will take the truth to the world?"

In my experience, East Timor is the greatest, most enduring crime of the late 20th century. Not only do the horrors committed by the Suharto dynasty lay claim to this distinction - proportionally, not even Pol Pot put to death as many people - but no other recent crime against humanity, from the American devastation of Indochina to Rwanda, offers such a comprehensive charge sheet. "Descent into violence" has become the most worked media cliché of the past few weeks, as if a collective, almost wilful amnesia prevents the current crop of western politicians and commentators remembering when the descent really began, and who were Indonesia's partners in its crime.

On 7 December 1975, when Air Force One, carrying President Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, had climbed out of Indonesian airspace, Indonesian paratroopers dropped on Dili, East Timor's capital, and the bloodbath began.

"[Ford and Kissinger] came and gave Suharto the green light," Philip Liechty, the CIA desk officer in Jakarta at the time, told me. "The invasion was delayed two days so they could get the hell out. We were ordered to give the Indonesians everything they wanted, and US arms were shipped straight to East Timor without Congress knowing. I saw all the hard intelligence; the place was a free fire zone . . . and all because we didn't want some little country being neutral or leftist at the UN."

There were other, more pressing reasons. "With the region's richest hoard of natural resources," wrote Richard Nixon in 1967, "Indonesia is the greatest prize in South-east Asia."

When Suharto came to power in the mid-1960s, exterminating more than half a million Indonesians in what a CIA report called "the greatest single mass murder of modern times", Michael Stewart, Harold Wilson's mild-mannered foreign secretary, visited Jakarta and reported that the "economic chaos of Indonesia" promised "great potential opportunities for British

exporters . . . I think we ought to take an active part and try to secure a slice of the cake ourselves". The Americans, Japanese, Europeans, Australians, Singaporeans, Koreans and Thais all had the same idea.

The petroleum referred to by the Kraras priest comes from the Timor Sea, believed to contain the seventh-largest oil and gas reserves on Earth. Gareth Evans, the former Australian foreign minister who toasted his Indonesian counterpart in champagne as they flew over the Timor Sea in 1989, having signed a piratical treaty to share the spoils below, was asked to estimate the potential profit. "Zillions," he said. Since then, western multinationals have, in effect, annexed East Timorese maritime territory.

The British empire was reborn in Indonesia. Britain is the largest investor in chemicals, paper, electricity and weapons. Name a major British multinational and you can bet it is "investing" in Indonesia. The list ranges from Shell and BP, to the BOC Group and Marks & Spencer, to Unilever and Glaxo Wellcome, to Rio Tinto, which has a huge holding in the \$3 billion Freeport copper-and-gold mining operation in West Papua - a territory virtually handed to Indonesia in 1960 by the United Nations.

However, it is the British war industry that has provided the Jakarta gang with its most vital prop since 1978. In that year, the then Labour foreign secretary David Owen dismissed estimates of East Timorese dead as "exaggerated" and approved the first Hawk fighter-bombers to Indonesia. As many as 40 Hawks, made by British Aerospace, have since been supplied or will be in the near future. Then there are the Wasp helicopters, Sea Wolf and Rapier SAM missiles, Tribal class frigates, battlefield communication systems, seabed mine disposal equipment, armoured vehicles, a fully equipped Institute of Technology for the Indonesian army, and training for Indonesian officers in Britain.

The Blair government, clearly guided by its crusading leader's "new kind of moral internationalism", has been the biggest arms suppliers. Last year, Blair's ministers approved the sale of 76.25 billion in arms throughout the world, most of it to countries with appalling human rights records. This figure was never reached by the Tories and is surpassed only by the United States.

The shame of East Timor's betrayal might finally enlighten those still smitten by the ridiculous notion that their Labour government is an "ethical" agent. While the Indonesian military and its death squads "cleanse" Dili, Blair has refused to use Britain's considerable clout. On Tuesday, the Foreign Office minister, John Battle, refused even to consider economic sanctions or to freeze arms sales. On Newsnight, his colleague, Tony Lloyd, appeared as a memorably unctuous apologist for the government's complicity.

None, however, can match Robin Cook who, in 1994, told parliament that Hawk aircraft had been "observed on bombing runs in East Timor in most years since 1984". He then denied his own words and, once in government, allowed his Foreign Office underlings to lie that no Hawks were operational in East Timor. The 1998 Human Rights Report, produced by the Foreign Office, makes not a single reference to arms sales, while there is a colour photograph of Cook smiling at Suharto, the genocidist.

Britain and the United States could probably stop the Indonesians in their tracks if they wanted to. At this weekend's meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (Apec) in New Zealand, President Bill Clinton could say that the \$27 billion economic aid promised to restore Indonesia's collapsed economy, funds that the US controls, would be withheld until Indonesian troops left East Timor, taking their militia goons with them. The precedent is South Africa. It was only when Congress forced Ronald Reagan to end "constructive engagement" with the Pretoria regime and forced American capital to pull out of South Africa that F W de Klerk made his historic compromises.

If Blair announced an immediate freeze on all investment, loans and especially arms sales to Jakarta, the rapid-firing machine-guns supplied to the Kopassus Gestapo by British Aerospace would not stop firing, but the psychological and political impact would be immense; the Indonesian military, already unsure of itself since the resignation of Suharto, would begin to be isolated.

Without pressure from their godfathers in Washington and London, the Indonesians are telling the United Nations and the world to go to hell; and the UN is scuttling, which means, in many respects, the beginning of its demise. Public opinion in the west is a greater force for change than most people realise. Are we going to let the East Timorese people, bravest of the brave, who have defied the genocidists and come out to vote for democracy and freedom, fall before our eyes? Are we really going to let the Blairs and Battles and Lloyds and Cooks get away with their cynicism and complicity, applied in our name?

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