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East Timorese people must be able to make their choice freely and securely

With two days before the East Timorese people are able to make their voices heard, the human rights situation in East Timor has worsened further, threatening not only the lives of the East Timorese people but the entire popular consultation process being carried out by the United Nations, Amnesty International said today.

“The Indonesian authorities’ disregard for the rights of the East Timorese people and the popular consultation process was underlined even more clearly today as armed pro-integration militias took to the streets of Dili leaving the population terrorised and at least four people dead,” Amnesty International added.

At least one of those killed was shot dead during a confrontation between militias and pro-independence youths in the Kuluhan area of Dili. Another person was reportedly killed by the police force who were even said by one eyewitness to have handed a gun to a militia member.

“Yet again the Indonesian authorities have failed to fulfill their obligation to protect the East Timorese people and create a secure environment in which they can participate freely and fairly in the ballot to determine the future of their territory. Instead they continue to allow their security forces to act in unison with militias to threaten, intimidate and murder.”

The human rights situation has deteriorated markedly over the past fortnight as the 30 August ballot approaches. At least five people have been unlawfully killed in militia and Indonesian National Army (TNI) operations and as many as 13 people are thought to be missing.

Thousands of people have fled the violence in the past two weeks. Despite clear provisions in the UN Agreements, the right to freedom of opinion and association have been widely violated, and in some areas pro-independence parties have been unable to campaign or even open their offices.

Some recent cases illustrate the severity of the situation:

On 18 August 1999, Augusto Martins, a university student, was arrested in Maliana Sub-district, Bobonaro District, after the bus that he was travelling on was stopped by a militia group. His body was found later that day. He had been hacked to death. Seven people who were travelling with him are still missing.

Marcelino Guterres was reported to have been arrested by members of the TNI and a militia group in Liquisa District on 12 August for alleged support of the independence movement. He has not been seen since.

Two university students were killed and several others are missing after militia attacks on the Students' Solidarity Council of East Timor (DSMTT) in Viqueque on 10 and 11 August. During the second attack, militia members were accompanied by TNI soldiers who, eyewitnesses claimed, fired automatic weapons at the students.

"With each killing and "disappearance" the prospect of a free and fair ballot is becoming more remote. The responsibility for the deterioration in the security situation lies with the Indonesian authorities which, despite repeated assurances, have failed to take the measures necessary to provide a

secure environment for the popular consultation process," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International has repeatedly reported on the pattern of human rights violations occurring in East Timor and called on the Indonesian authorities and the international community to take measures to create an environment free of intimidation, threats and attacks. The credibility of the Indonesian authorities in front of the international community will also be at stake on 30 August.

It is also the responsibility of the international community and the United Nations Security Council to ensure the promises made to the East Timorese people -- that they will be able to make their choice freely and securely -- are not betrayed. Despite the situation, the ballot is expected to go ahead and many East Timorese are taking considerable risks to participate.

"There have been repeated assurances from the Indonesian authorities that they would act to improve the situation - yet they have consistently failed to fulfil their commitments. There are only three days to go before the ballot and it is clear that free and open political activity in East Timor is still extremely dangerous."

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