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An Island Lies Bleeding

Noam Chomsky

July 5, 1994

In the annals of crime of this terrible century, Indonesia's assault against East Timor ranks high, not only because of its scale – perhaps the greatest death toll relative to the population since the Holocaust – but because it would have been so easy to prevent, and to bring to an end at any time. There is no need for threats to bomb Jakarta, or even to impose sanctions on the aggressor. It would suffice for the great powers to refrain from their eager participation in Indonesia's crimes – to stop putting guns into the hands of the killers and torturers while joining them in robbery of the offshore oil of the Timor Gap.

There is no excuse for any ignorance about these matters with the appearance of the 1994 edition of John Pilger's book, *Distant Voices*, with its powerful and revealing chapters on East Timor.

Two years ago, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said that his government faced an important choice on East Timor, which had become "like a sharp piece of gravel in our shoes." Benedict Anderson, a leading specialist on Indonesia, took this to be one of many signs of second thoughts: "Alatas doesn't spell out what the choice is," Anderson commented, "but he's implying you should take your shoe off and get rid of the gravel."

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The gravel was not sharpened by Western power. Quite the contrary: the West and Japan have been willing partners in Indonesia's conquest and annexation of the former Portuguese colony. As Pilger documents, it was well before Indonesia began its campaign of subversion and terror in 1975, followed by direct invasion on December 7, that the British Embassy in Jakarta reported, "Certainly as seen from here it is in Britain's interest that Indonesia should absorb the territory as soon as and as unobtrusively as possible; and that if it comes to the crunch and there is a row in the United Nations we should keep our heads down and avoid siding against the Indonesian government."

Australia shared this judgment. Pilger describes how in August 1975, Ambassador to Jakarta Richard Woolcott advised in secret cables that Australia take "a pragmatic rather than a principled stand" with regard to the forthcoming invasion because "that is what national interest and foreign policy is all about." Along with the ritual reference to "the Australian defence interest," Woolcott suggested that a favourable treaty on the Timor Gap "could be much more readily negotiated with Indonesia ... than with Portugal or independent Portuguese Timor." He recommended a preference for "Kissingerian realism" over "Wilsonian idealism" – a distinction that can perhaps be detected in actual practice, with a powerful enough microscope.

The reasons for support for Indonesia's crimes went well beyond oil and "defence interests", including control of a deep-water passage for nuclear submarines. Indonesia has been an honoured ally ever since General Suharto came to power in 1965 with a "boiling bloodbath" that was "The West's best news for years in Asia" (Time), a "staggering mass slaughter of Communists and pro-Communists", mostly landless peasants, that provided a "gleam of light in Asia" (New York Times). Euphoria knew no bounds, along with praise for the "Indonesian moderates" who prevailed (NYT) and their leader, who is "at heart benign" (Economist).

John Pilger's recent work, including the remarkable documentary *Death Of A Nation*, based on his visit to East Timor, threatens to arouse the Western public to a heightened awareness of what is being perpetrated in their names. Its great significance is attested by the angry response it has evoked from high government officials. To draw aside the veils of deceit that conceal the real world is no small achievement. But it will join other failed efforts unless the public response goes beyond mere awareness, to actions to end shameful complicity in crime.

crosses multiply on the hillsides,” a constant “reminder of the fallibility of brute power and of the cynicism of others”.

However courageous they may be, the people of East Timor have no hope without outside support. No amount of courage and unity will prevent Indonesian transmigration, atrocities, and destruction of the indigenous culture, funded and supported by the great powers.

Though the pace has been glacial, support for Timorese rights has finally reached a significant level in the United States. The truth began to seep into the public domain, compelling the media to take some notice and raising impediments to the “pragmatic course”.

A headline in the Boston Globe on the anniversary of the 1991 massacre reads: “Indonesian general, facing suit, flees Boston.” Sent to study at Harvard after the massacre, the general was charged in a suit on behalf of a woman whose son was among those murdered in the graveyard (as were many more afterwards, as revealed by Pilger and the courageous Indonesian academic George Aditjondro, who released investigations based on 20 years’ research that supports the most gruesome estimates of atrocities).

Popular awareness and activism have become strong enough so that favoured mass murderers can no longer find a comfortable refuge in the United States, as had been learned a year earlier by one of Guatemala’s leading killers, General Hector Gramajo, in a similar manner.

Congress has imposed barriers on military aid and training, which the White House has had to evade in ever more devious ways, particularly in recent months. Sensing the opportunity, Britain moved effectively under Thatcher’s guiding hand to take first place in the highly profitable enterprise of war crimes. As explained by defence procurement minister Alan Clark, “I don’t really fill my mind much with what one set of foreigners is doing to another” when there is money to be made by arms sales. We must insist on “reserving the right to bomb niggers,” as Lloyd George recognised 60 years ago.

Not only did the welcome bloodbath destroy the only mass-based political party in Indonesia, but it opened the rich resources of the country to Western exploitation and even justified the American war in Vietnam, which “provided a shield for the sharp reversal of Indonesia’s shift toward Communism,” as Freedom House soberly explained with no reservations. Such favours are not quickly forgotten.

Woolcott offered some illustrations of “Kissingerian realism”. Noting with diplomatic understatement that “The United States might have some influence on Indonesia at present”, he reported that Kissinger had instructed US Ambassador David Newsom to avoid the Timor issue and cut down Embassy reporting, allowing “events to take their course”. Newsom informed Woolcott that if Indonesia were to invade, the US hoped it would do so “effectively, quickly, and not use our equipment” – 90 per cent of its weapons supply.

Another lesson in realism was given by UN Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan, celebrated for his courageous defence of international law and human rights. “The United States wished things to turn out as they did,” he writes in his memoirs, “and worked to bring this about. The Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success.” Moynihan cites figures of 60,000 killed in the first few months, “almost the proportion of casualties experienced by the Soviet Union during the second world war,” a foretaste of still greater successes soon to come.

Western governments were fully aware of what was happening throughout, contrary to subsequent pretence. As revealed in leaked internal records, Kissinger’s worst fear was that his complicity in the aggression might become public, and “used against me” by real or imagined political enemies. Cable traffic shows that after “Suharto was given the green light” the main concern of the Embassy and State Department was “about the problems that would

be created for us if the public and Congress became aware” of the American role, according to Philip Liechty, then a senior CIA officer in Jakarta, in an interview with Pilger.

Weapons provided by the US were limited strictly to self-defence. That posed no problem for Kissingerian realism: “And we can’t construe a Communist government in the middle of Indonesia as self defence?” Kissinger asked with derision when the question was raised in internal discussion. An independent East Timor would be “communist” by the usual criteria: it might not follow orders in a sprightly enough manner, interfering with the “national interest”. New arms were sent including counter-insurgency equipment; “everything that you need to fight a major war against somebody who doesn’t have any guns,” Liechty comments, adding that the advanced military equipment proved decisive, as other sources confirm. Had there been a challenge, ample precedent could have been cited. “Great souls care little for small morals,” another statesman observed two centuries ago.

By 1977 Indonesia found itself short of weapons, an indication of the scale of its attack. The Carter Administration accelerated the arms flow. Britain joined in as atrocities peaked in 1978, while France announced that it would sell arms to Indonesia and protect it from any public “embarrassment”. Others, too, sought to gain what profit they could from the slaughter and torture of Timorese.

The press added its contribution. Coverage of East Timor in the United States had been high in 1974–5, amidst concerns over the break-up of the Portuguese empire. As another “boiling bloodbath” proceeded, coverage declined, keeping largely to the lies and apologies of the State Department and Indonesian generals. By 1978, as the slaughter reached genocidal levels, coverage reached flat zero. The same was true in Canada, another leading supporter of Indonesia.

In 1990, the issue of Timor received some attention when Iraq invaded Kuwait, eliciting a response from the West rather unlike its reaction to Indonesia’s vastly more bloody invasion and annex-

ation of a small oil-rich country next door. Much ingenuity was displayed in explaining that the distinction did not lie in the locus of power and profit, but in some more subtle quality that preserves Anglo-American virtue. Similar gyrations had been undertaken a decade earlier to justify the radically different reaction to simultaneous atrocities in Cambodia and Timor; crucially different, to be sure, in that the latter could have been readily terminated.

Some commentators were forthright. Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans explained in 1990, “The world is a pretty unfair place, littered with examples of acquisition by force.” Since “there is no binding legal obligation not to recognise the acquisition of territory that was acquired by force,” Australia may proceed to share Timor’s oil with the conqueror. The dispensation would presumably not have extended to a Libya-Iraq treaty on Kuwaiti oil. Meanwhile prime minister Hawke declared that “big countries cannot invade small neighbours and get away with it” (referring to Iraq and Kuwait); “would-be aggressors will think twice before invading smaller neighbours,” secure in the lesson that “the rule of law must prevail over the rule of force in international relations” – at least, when the “national interest” so dictates.

The Timor issue reached threshold again in November 1991, when Indonesian troops attacked a graveyard commemoration of an earlier assassination, massacring hundreds of people and severely beating two US reporters. The tactical error called for the standard cover-up, deemed satisfactory by Western leaders. Oil exploration proceeded on course; contracts with Australian, British, Japanese, Dutch, and American companies were reported in the six months following the massacre. “To the capitalist governors,” a Timorese priest wrote, “Timor’s petroleum smells better than Timorese blood and tears.”

The primary reason why Indonesia might consider “taking the shoe off” is given in the final words of Pilger’s chapters on East Timor. The reason, he writes, is “the enduring heroism of the people of East Timor, who continue to resist the invaders even as the