

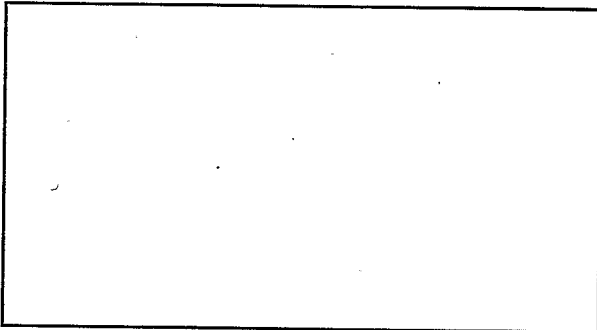
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Indonesia: Timor Surprise (U)RELEASED IN PART
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Jakarta's announcement that it may consider independence for East Timor follows increasing international pressure and escalating violence on the ground. The intent may be to stimulate support for a special autonomy status, but the statement is likely to fuel sentiment for a separate state. (C)

The information minister yesterday announced that if the East Timorese "masses" reject Jakarta's offer for widespread autonomy, the government will suggest that the next People's Consultative Assembly, to convene after the June 7 election, consider allowing East Timor to separate from Indonesia. Foreign Minister Alatas clarified that Jakarta would not accept any formula that called for an interim period of years before the East Timorese make a decision, arguing such a delay would lead to civil conflict. Jakarta also announced that imprisoned East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao would be moved to a house designated a "prison branch," to get around a legal constraint on formal house arrest. (U)



■ Trumping the Timorese

The statement marks the first time Jakarta has publicly acknowledged that East Timor could be expendable. East Timorese activists are expressing skepticism but are hailing the statement as evidence Jakarta knows it has lost. Increasing international pressure, including Canberra's recent decision to alter its stance to support an act of self-determination, no doubt helped tip the balance in favor of those in Jakarta who hope to get rid of the Timor albatross. Some may calculate that the threat of abruptly cutting ties, including vital social services, will prompt more moderate leaders like Xanana,

who have advocated a transitional period before independence, to opt for some special form of autonomy. Ultimately, leaders in Jakarta may have decided it is less risky to cut East Timor loose than to lose face through rejection in a referendum that could set an unacceptable model for other provinces. (C)

■ Escalating violence in East Timor

The military's decision to arm pro-integration (pro-Jakarta) civil militias after two months of attacks on troops and pro-Indonesia civilians has fueled clashes with anti-integration civilians and resistance guerrillas. These newly established militia groups have little or no training and operate independently, frequently seeking to settle old scores. [redacted]

[redacted] told US officials in mid-January that he saw emerging a disturbing pattern of violence, in which paramilitary groups armed by the military provoke conflict that leads to a military response. Tension between the military and the local governor has paralyzed the local bureaucracy and is feeding fears of a vacuum of authority. (C/NF)

[redacted] estimates that at least 50 people have been killed over the past six months, though critics say the number is much higher. An estimated 1,000 people fled in mid-January to the provincial capital in Dili to escape clashes and feared reprisals, seriously straining relief resources. In the latest round of violence, which began on January 24 in the southern town of Suai, at least four people have died and more than 2,000 have reportedly fled. (C)
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