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East Timor: Comments On the Occasion of the Forthcoming APEC Summit

Noam Chomsky

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There are many topics of major long-term significance that should be addressed at the APEC conference, but one is of consuming importance and overwhelming urgency. We all know exactly what it is, and why it must be placed at the forefront of concern — and more important, instant action. This conference provides an opportunity — there may not be many more — to terminate the tragedy that is once again reaching shocking proportions in East Timor. The Indonesian military forces who invaded East Timor 24 years ago, and have been slaughtering and terrorizing its inhabitants ever since, are right now, as I write, in the process of sadistically destroying what remains: the population, the cities and villages. What they are planning, we cannot be sure: a Carthaginian solution is not out of the question.

The tragedy of East Timor has been one of the most awesome of this terrible century. It is also of particular moral significance for us, for the simplest and most obvious of reasons.

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Western complicity has been direct and decisive. The expected corollary also holds: unlike the crimes of official enemies, these can be ended by means that have always been readily available, and still are.

The current wave of terror and destruction began early this year, under the pretense that the atrocities were the work of “uncontrolled militias.” It was quickly revealed that these were paramilitary forces armed, organized, and directed by the Indonesian army, who also participated directly in their “criminal activities,” as these have just been described by Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, still maintaining the shameful pretense that the “military institution” that is directing the crimes is seeking to stop them.

The Indonesian military forces are commonly described as “rogue elements.” That is hardly accurate. Most prominent among them are Kopassus units sent to East Timor to carry out the actions for which they are famed, and dreaded. They have “the job of managing the militias, many observers believe,” veteran Asia correspondent David Jenkins reported as the terror was mounting. Kopassus is the “crack special forces unit” modeled on the U.S. Green Berets that had “been training regularly with US and Australian forces until their behaviour became too much of an embarrassment for their foreign friends.” These forces are “legendary for their cruelty,” observes Benedict Anderson, one of the leading Indonesia scholars. In East Timor, Anderson continues, “Kopassus became the pioneer and exemplar for every kind of atrocity,” including systematic rapes, tortures and executions, and organization of hooded gangsters.

Jenkins wrote that Kopassus officers, trained in the United States, adopted the tactics of the US Phoenix program in South Vietnam, which killed tens of thousands of peasants and much of the indigenous South Vietnamese leadership, as well as “the tactics employed by the Contras” in Nicaragua, following lessons taught by their CIA mentors that it should be unnecessary to review. The state terrorists were “not

simply going after the most radical pro-independence people but going after the moderates, the people who have influence in their community.” “It’s Phoenix,” a well-placed source in Jakarta reported: the aim is “to terrorise everyone” — the NGOs, the Red Cross, the UN, the journalists.

All of this was well before the referendum and the atrocities conducted in its immediate aftermath. As to these, there is good reason to heed the judgment of a high-ranking Western official in Dili. “Make no mistake,” he reported: “this is being directed from Jakarta. This is not a situation where a few gangs of rag-tag militia are out of control. As everybody here knows, it has been a military operation from start to finish.”

The official was speaking from the UN compound in which the UN observers, the last few reporters, and thousands of terrified Timorese finally took refuge, besieged by Indonesia’s paramilitary agents. At that time, a few days ago, the UN estimated that violent expulsions had perhaps reached 200,000 people, about a quarter of the population, with unknown numbers killed and physical destruction running to billions of dollars. At best, it would take decades to rebuild the territory’s basic infrastructure, they concluded. And the army may well have still more far-reaching goals.

In the months before the August 30 referendum, the horror story continued. Citing diplomatic, church, and militia sources, Australian journalists reported in July “that hundreds of modern assault rifles, grenades and mortars are being stockpiled, ready for use if the autonomy [within Indonesia] option is rejected at the ballot box.” They warned that the army-run militias might be planning a violent takeover of much of the territory if, despite the terror, the popular will would be expressed. All of this was well understood by the “foreign friends,” who also knew how to bring the terror to an end, but preferred to delay, hesitate, and keep to evasive and ambiguous reactions that the Indonesian Generals could easily interpret as a “green light” to carry out their grim work.

In a display of extraordinary courage and heroism, virtually the entire population made their way to the ballot-boxes, many emerging from hiding to do so. Braving brutal intimidation and terror, they voted overwhelming in favor of the right of self-determination that had long ago been endorsed by the United Nations Security Council and the World Court.

Immediately, the Indonesian occupying forces reacted as had been predicted by observers on the scene. The weapons that had been stockpiled, and the forces that had been mobilized, conducted a well-planned operation. They proceeded to drive out anyone who might bring the terrible story to the outside world and cut off communications, while massacring, expelling tens of thousands of people to an unknown fate, burning and destroying, murdering priests and nuns, and no one knows how many other hapless victims. The capital city of Dili has been virtually destroyed. In the countryside, where the army can rampage undetected, one can only guess what has taken place.

Even before the latest outrages, highly credible Church sources had reported 3–5000 killed in 1999, well beyond the scale of atrocities in Kosovo prior to the NATO bombings. The scale might even reach the level of Rwanda if the “foreign friends” keep to timid expressions of disapproval while insisting that internal security in East Timor “is the responsibility of the Government of Indonesia, and we don’t want to take that responsibility away from them” — the official position of the State Department a few days before the August 30 referendum.

It would have been far less hypocritical to have said, early this year, that internal security in Kosovo “is the responsibility of the Government of Yugoslavia, and we don’t want to take that responsibility away from them.” Indonesia’s crimes in East Timor have been vastly greater, even just this year, not to speak of their actions during the years of aggression and terror; Western-backed, we should never allow ourselves to forget.

Indonesia matters and East Timor doesn't," a Western diplomat in Jakarta bluntly observed a few days ago. It is no "dilemma," he might have added, but rather standard operating procedure. Explaining why the U.S. refuses to take a stand, New York Times Asia specialists Elizabeth Becker and Philip Shenon report that the Clinton Administration "has made the calculation that the United States must put its relationship with Indonesia, a mineral-rich nation of more than 200 million people, ahead of its concern over the political fate of East Timor, a tiny impoverished territory of 800,000 people that is seeking independence." Their fate as human beings apparently does not even reach the radar screen, for these calculations. The Washington Post quotes Douglas Paal, president of the Asia Pacific Policy Center, reporting the facts of life: "Timor is a speed bump on the road to dealing with Jakarta, and we've got to get over it safely. Indonesia is such a big place and so central to the stability of the region."

Even without secret Pentagon assurances, Indonesian Generals can surely read these statements and draw the conclusion that they will be granted leeway to work their will.

The analogy to Kosovo has repeatedly been drawn in the past days. It is singularly inappropriate, in many crucial respects. A closer analogy would be to Iraq-Kuwait, though this radically understates the scale of the atrocities and the culpability of the United States and its allies. There is still time, though very little time, to prevent a hideous consummation of one of the most appalling tragedies of the terrible century that is winding to a horrifying, wrenching close.

That aside, Indonesia has no claim whatsoever to the territory it invaded and occupied, apart from the claim based on support by the Great Powers.

The "foreign friends" also understand that direct intervention in the occupied territory, however justified, might not even be necessary. If the United States were to take a clear, unambiguous, and public stand, informing the Indonesian Generals that this game is over, that might very well suffice. The same has been true for the past quarter-century, as the US provided critical military and diplomatic support for the invasion and atrocities. These were directed by General Suharto, compiling yet another chapter in his gruesome record, always with Western support, and often acclaim. He was once again praised by the Clinton Administration. He is "our kind of guy," the Administration declared as he visited Washington shortly before he fell from grace by losing control and dragging his feet on IMF orders.

If changing the former green light to a new red light does not suffice, Washington and its allies have ample means at their disposal: termination of arms sales to the killers; initiation of war crimes trials against the army leadership — not an insignificant threat; cutting the economic support funds that are, incidentally, not without their ambiguities; putting a hold on Western energy corporations and multinationals, along with other investment and commercial activities. There is also no reason to shy away from peacekeeping forces to replace the occupying terrorist army, if that proves necessary. Indonesia has no authority to "invite" foreign intervention, as President Clinton urged, any more than Saddam Hussein had authority to invite foreign intervention in Kuwait, or Nazi Germany in France in 1944 for that matter. If dispatch of peacekeeping forces is disguised by such prettified terminology, it is of no great importance, as long as we do not succumb to illusions that prevent us from understanding what has happened, and what it portends.

What the U.S. and its allies are doing, we scarcely know. The New York Times reports that the Defense Department is “taking the lead in dealing with the crisis,...hoping to make use of longstanding ties between the Pentagon and the Indonesian military.” The nature of these ties over many decades is no secret. Important light on the current stage is provided by Alan Nairn, who survived the Dili massacre in 1991 and barely escaped with his life in Dili again a few days ago. In another stunning investigative achievement, Nairn has just revealed that immediately after the vicious massacre of dozens of refugees seeking shelter in a church in Liquica, U.S. Pacific Commander Admiral Dennis Blair assured Indonesian Army chief General Wiranto of US support and assistance, proposing a new U.S. training mission.

On September 8, the Pacific Command announced that Admiral Blair is once again being sent to Indonesia to convey U.S. concerns. On the same day, Secretary of Defense William Cohen reported that a week before the referendum in August, the US was carrying out joint operations with the Indonesian army — “a U.S.-Indonesian training exercise focused on humanitarian and disaster relief activities,” the wire services reported. The fact that Cohen could say this without shame leaves one numb with amazement. The training exercise was put to use within days — in the standard way, as all but the voluntarily blind must surely understand after many years of the same tales, the same outcomes.

Every slight move comes with an implicit retraction. On the eve of the APEC meeting, on September 9, Clinton announced the termination of military ties; but without cutting off arms sales, and while declaring East Timor to be “still a part of Indonesia,” which it is not and has never been. The decision was delivered to General Wiranto by Admiral Blair. It takes no unusual cynicism to watch the current secret interactions with a skeptical eye.

Skepticism is only heightened by the historical record: to mention one recent case, Clinton’s evasion of congressional restrictions barring U.S. training of Indonesian military officers after the Dili massacre. The earlier record is far worse from the first days of the U.S.-authorized invasion. While the U.S. publicly condemned the aggression, Washington secretly supported it with a new flow of arms, which was increased by the Carter Administration as the slaughter reached near-genocidal levels in 1978. It was then that highly credible Church and other sources in East Timor attempted to make public the estimates of 200,000 deaths that came to be accepted years later, after constantly denial.

Every student in the West, every citizen with even a minimal concern for international affairs, should know by heart the frank and honest description of the opening days of the invasion by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then America’s U.N. Ambassador. The Security Council ordered the invaders to withdraw at once, but without effect. In his memoirs, published as the terror peaked 20 years ago, Moynihan explained the reasons: “The United States wished things to turn out as they did,” and he dutifully “worked to bring this about,” rendering the UN “utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook.” As for how “things turned out,” Moynihan comments that within a few months 60,000 Timorese had been killed, “almost the proportion of casualties experienced by the Soviet Union during the Second World War.” End of story, though not in the real world.

So matters have continued since, not just in the United States. England has a particularly ugly record, as do Australia, France, and all too many others. That fact alone confers on them enormous responsibility to act, not only to end the atrocities, but to provide reparations as at least some miserable gesture of compensation for their crimes.

The reasons for the Western stance are very clear. They are currently stated with brutal frankness. “The dilemma is that In-