East Timor. Do They Have A Right To Autonomy Essay, Research Paper

East Timor is half of an island in Indonesia, about 300 miles north of Australia. In the 1500’s, Portugal colonized the island of Timor, and its inhabitants today are primarily Catholic. The Dutch colonized much of the area, eventually including the western half of Timor as part of the Dutch East Indies. Before 1975 it was a lush paradise that had remained virtually untouched by the western world. In 1975 Indonesia invaded and annexed the now defenseless East Timor. It was an act based upon greed and corruption that was conceived by several international governments. Since 1975, Indonesia’s military dictatorship has conducted a brutal campaign of genocide against the East Timorese, killing 200,000 people, or one third of the population. The question of whether East Timor should have independence has been clear for most of the international community. The ones who argue the issue are the ones who are making money off the blood of innocent victims in a war the East Timorese want nothing to do with. The East Timorese are “caretakers of the land”(Briere) and do not want to die so others can become rich. East Timor was “one of the last true Polynesian civilizations in the world.”(Briere)

The invasion by the Indonesians on December 7 1975 was one of the bloodiest slaughters in recent history killing hundreds of thousands. The invasion commenced at dawn with an Air, Sea, and Land attack on the East Timorese. “There are great black crosses etched against the sky — crosses on peaks, crosses in tiers on the hillsides, crosses beside the roads. In East Timor they litter the earth and crowd the eye. Walk into the scrub and they are there, always it seems, on the edges of riverbanks and escarpments, commanding all before them. Look at the dates on most of them, and they reveal the extinction of whole families, wiped out in the space of a year, a month, a day. “R.I.P. Mendonca, Crissmina, 7.6.77 … Mendonca, Filismina, 7.6.77 … Mendonca, Adalino, 7.6.77 … Mendonca, Alisa, 7.6.77 … Mendonca, Rosa, 7.6.77 … Mendonca, Anita, 7.6.77.” (Pilger 1994) It was not an invasion, but an attack on the peaceful natives of this island in order to get what they had.

The invasion of East Timor was caused for several reasons depending on your sources. If the Indonesian version is to be accepted then it was not an invasion but an assumption of territory that was rightfully belonging to Indonesia. When Indonesia gained independence from the Dutch they claimed all former Dutch colonies as their own. The Dutch had colonised west Timor, so the argument is that it is part of Indonesia. The threat, as the Indonesians saw it, was that if they granted sovereignty to one people they will have to do the same for others and then the country starts to disintegrate. If you believe the rest of the world then it was an aggressive attack on a small island in order to take control of large oil deposits of the coast of Timor. “In August 1975, in a famous cable that was leaked, he [Woolcott] advised that Australia must go along with the impending invasion because Australia could make a better deal on the oil reserves in the Timor Gap with Indonesia than with Portugal or an independent East Timor.” (Chomsky 1995) Within a few years of the invasion Philips Petroleum was already established in the Timor Sea and was drilling for oil. The Australian government was signing contracts with oil companies and giving aid to the Indonesians all the while the East Timorese were dying in order to facilitate this.

Amongst all the human rights violations in the history of Indonesia, the blatant disregard for human life in the case of East Timor is one of the worst. The genocide that has taken place there has been the worst per capita since the holocaust. “The government tries to brush off these violations as isolated incidents of the work of a few poorly-disciplined soldiers, when in fact they are the by-product of a network of institutions, procedures and policies which the government uses to crush perceived threats to stability and order,” says Amnesty International secretary general Pierre San . Indonesia operates under the mask of a democracy, but it is not. A democracy would not so blatantly disregard the basic rules of human rights, and it would listen to what the people have to say. The Indonesian government is not listening to what the international community has to say about East Timor, and they are not listening to what the East Timorese want, which is independence from a colonial power. Indonesia is no different than the Dutch. They are a larger more powerful nation, which has invaded a smaller weaker country in order to seize the natural resources. It is even worse to think that the reason all the killings have taken place is for a resource that could have been had for probably similar price. Yet the greed and corruption of the Suharto government, found reason in killing 200,000 innocent people in order to get control of the oil deposits. And what’s good for the energy companies, is always the national interest. That’s true virtually by definition.

The United Nations has never accepted the occupation of East Timor by the Indonesians, because they do not have a lawful claim. The UN held the first resolution on the 22 of December 1975. “Recognising the inalienable right of the people of East Timor to self-determination and independence in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples, contained in General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960.” (Alert 1998)The international community did not recognise the take over, yet Canada is, to my dismay, one of the worst offenders of the crime of economic involvement and financial investment in Indonesia. Companies such as Bata shoes and INCO Min. Corp make it possible for the Indonesian government to continue conducting itself in this violent oppressive manner. With the economic investment in Indonesia it is like saying that what is going on in East Timor is acceptable. Only up until recently did Canada vote yes on a resolution put forth by the UN General Assembly. On 8 resolutions put forth by the UN General Assembly during the years 1975 and 1982 concerning East Timor, Canada either voted against, or abstained on all 8 votes. (Alert1998) There is now more pressure from the International community, on the Indonesian government to allow the East Timorese independence, which is leading to some advancement in negotiations. Canada, now being on the UN security counsel, has an opportunity to make significant advancement with Indonesia due to its economic involvement in the area.

Prior to 1998, the National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRM) was the umbrella organization of East Timorese resistance at home and abroad. Then jailed resistance leader Xanana Gusmao, aiming to unite all resistance factions in one effectively coordinated international effort, which was officially by the launched CNRM in 1988.

The chief mission of CNRM was to lead the resistance against Indonesian aggression and enable the East Timorese people to freely determine their future in accordance with their internationally acknowledged human right of self-determination. Another goal of the CNRM was to develop the governing institutions of a future state of East Timor.

In April, 1998, this goal was realized as over 200 East Timorese representing those living inside and in exile gathered at a convention in Portugal to form the National Council of Timorese Resistance (Conselho Nacional da Resistencia Timorense CNRT) and adopt a charter for their future country. Like the CNRM did, the CNRT embodies all Timorese resistance organizations and political parties both inside East Timor and in the Diaspora. Xanana Gusmao was reaffirmed by acclamation at the convention as leader of the East Timorese Resistance and president of CNRT. Gusmao is now serving a 20-year prison sentence in Indonesia. Jos Ramos-Horta, co-winner of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize, was named the Vice President of the CNRT.

In 1996 the Bishop Carlos Ximenes Felipe Belo along with Jose Ramos-Horta were awarded the Nobel Peace prize for their efforts in the East Timorese cause. More attention started coming onto Indonesia for their handling of the East Timor situation. Even their economic allies were voting in for some sort of autonomy Even in Indonesia there is progress being made toward the autonomy of East Timor. On February 4 of this year President Habibie said “I would consider granting the territory independence later this year if the offer of autonomy under Indonesian rule is not accepted.”(Times 1999) The decision of choosing autonomy or independence is difficult for the East Timorese. The Bishop said ” Both have advantages and disadvantages and we must all talk it out.”(Alert 1999) There is still much work to be done and the killing of the East Timorese is still going on, in fact there was a reported 17 East Timorese killed by the Indonesian-backed militia in East Timor at the beginning of April 1999. (Alert 1999) It is evident that East Timor will never be autonomous as long as the Indonesians have militias on the island. President Habibie said that the East Timorese will be able to vote on the June 7 elections would be able to express acceptance or rejection of autonomy through their representatives in the new legislature. “In the general assembly of the (next) People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) the representatives of the East Timorese people are still there because they will take part in the elections as part of the regional representatives as well as those from socio-professional groupings”. (Alert 1999) Habibie said East Timorese “can convey their aspiration and later respect the decisions of the MPR’s general assembly.”

The island of East Timor was illegaly invaded by the Indonesians just after the Timorese got independence from the Portuguese. 24 years and 200,000 lives later they are still trying to achieve what is rightfully theirs. Their autonomy. The Indonesians fought to get their independence from the Dutch, as did the other colonized countries in the area. Somehow the Indonesians think that the rest of the world will watch as they conduct one of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century. So they should, we have done nothing for the last 23 years. The Indonesian claim, that East Timor is part of Indonesia because the western half was colonized by the Dutch, is weak at best. If the truth be told, hundreds of thousand innocent women children and men were slaughtered to line the pockets of international business. The East Timorese were exploited and left to die in the face of their oppressors. In 1996 two East Timorese were presented with the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to achieve peace and autonomy for their people. One can decide for one’s self as to whether to believe the Suharto government, or the individuals, who through their struggle to free their country, who were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the choice is theirs.

The Indonesian government invaded East Timor. The reasons the Indonesians gave were weak, a formality, something that might be used as an excuse for the international community. The lies and manipulations that the East Timorese had to endure over the years so that a select few people could exploit the natural resources of their island. The genocide and torture that they had to face so that they might bend to the overwhelming odds of the oppressive forces was and is unimaginable, but they did not. With continuing efforts by the UN, the CNRT, and other groups some progress has been made towards autonomy. Very recently there has been escalations in the fighting between the Indonesian-backed militias and the East Timorese rebels after the killings earlier this month. Since 1996 Indonesia has been receiving more and more publicity surrounding East Timor, and it is all-negative. This little island is becoming more trouble than it’s worth, especially since the oil deposits have not yet turned up the expected amounts. Hopefully this recent fighting will not end the talks with Indonesia, for if East Timor is to gain independence they must deal with the Indonesians, no matter how unfair it might be.

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