

The hunters and the hunted

Jeffrey Bartholet, Ron Moreau. Newsweek. New York: Sep 27, 1999. Vol. 134, Iss. 13; pg. 38, 1 pg

EURICO GUTERRES IS NOT A VERY imposing enemy. On one level, he's just a two-bit thug, a former gang boss who allegedly controlled prostitution and gambling rackets in East Timor. But he also commands the pro-Indonesian Aitarak-or Thorn-militia. Ever since East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia on Aug. 30, his militiamen have terrorized civilians, slaughtering some and forcing thousands of others to flee to the mountains. Now he wants to intimidate the international force of at least 7,000 soldiers, led by Australia, that is attempting to take control of the remote territory. "We East Timorese are thirsty for the blood of white people," Guterres boasted last week.

The rescue of East Timor is delicately called a "peacekeeping mission:' But make no mistake. This is a peacemaking mission. As mandated last week by the U.N. Security Council, International Force for East Timor (Interfet) can use "all necessary measures" to "restore peace and security" and help get relief supplies to the wounded, sick and starving. President Clinton, who has pledged some 200 American soldiers to help with logistics, communications and perhaps intelligence in both Australia and East Timor, last week warned that international troops will "face some stiff challenges:' Australian Prime Minister John Howard was more blunt. "There will be danger. There could be casualties. And the Australian public should understand that."

Could East Timor become a depressing death trap for well-intentioned foreigners? It was only a half-dozen years ago that U.S. forces failed to enforce peace on warring militias in Somalia-and withdrew after the corpses of dead GIs were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. But East Timor is considered a very different case. In the August referendum, held under U.N. auspices, 78.5 percent of voters rejected the oppressive rule of Indonesia and its local militia allies. This vast majority will support the Interfet troops. The militiamen, meanwhile, resemble scruffy street gangs. Even the hard-core fighters are more accustomed to murdering civilians than fighting pitched battles. But then, that's what a lot of people said about the Somalis. The main worry now is that militiamen will snipe at foreign troops, or stage hit-and-run raids from Indonesian West Timor.

Teenager Joao Brito was lucky to escape one of the Thorn militia massacres. In the safety of a refugee camp in Darwin, Australia, he recalled last week what happened in his hometown, Ermera, on the western edge of East Timor. When the paramilitaries began their rampage, Brito hid in a coffee plantation overlooking the town. From there, he watched Thorn militiamen, wearing black T shirts and red and white headbands (the colors of the Indonesian flag), fire automatic weapons wildly to force people indoors. Brito, who recognized some of the attackers, said they then poured gasoline around the houses of independence activists and set them alight. The militiamen allowed women and children to flee, Brito says, but forced men back into the flames. As houses burned, the militiamen danced. "They shouted, 'You dogs, you don't have the right to become independent!'"

The priorities of Interfet forces will be to protect civilians and to open routes for relief supplies. Australia began food drops from transport planes last week, but tens of thousands of people were still hiding in the mountains, living on roots, bark and coconuts. In Indonesian West Timor, aid workers reported finding corpses-presumed to be pro-independence activists-near camps packed with 130,000 refugees. Nobody knows the overall death toll (estimates range from the hundreds to 7,000). But as refugees return and people emerge from hiding, the extent of the atrocities will become more clear. "The real culprits are the Indonesian military," says exiled independence leader Jose Ramos-Horta, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. "The war criminals, wherever they are, will be hunted down. We will find them one by one."

The Security Council resolution adopted last week demands that people responsible for the violence "be brought to justice." Eventually, that could entail a formal investigation into crimes against humanity. Ramos-Horta believes that prospect alone could be a death sentence for militia leaders like Guterres. "He can testify on the role of the Indonesian Army," Ramos-Horta says. "But I doubt Eurico Guterres will be alive for more than two months. He knows too much." It may take more than peacemakers to bring an end to decades of intrigue and bloodshed.