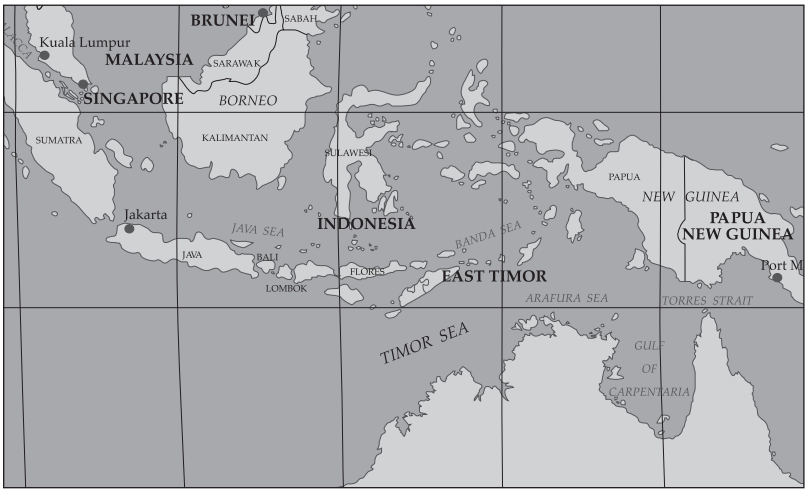
East Timor under Portuguese and Indonesian rule

1. PORTUGUESE RULE

The Portuguese presence in Timor began in the 16th century. It became a colony in 1702 with the arrival of the first governor from Lisbon. In the 18th century, the Netherlands gained a foothold in the western half of the island, and was formally granted West Timor in 1859 through the Treaty of Lisbon. After World War II, the Dutch granted independence to its former colonies and West Timor became part of Indonesia.



The Asia-Pacific region

In 1974, after a coup which overthrew its fascist dictatorship, Portugal granted East Timor the right to self-determination. Elections were held in March 1975. While the Apodeti Party in East Timor supported integration with Indonesia, it was the Fretlin (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) which won the election. As the Portuguese withdrew, Indonesia made no secret of its plan to invade East Timor. Xavier de Amaral, the first president and president of Fretlin, declared independence on 28 November 1975, hoping that Indonesia would not invade a sovereign state.

2. INDONESIAN OCCUPATION

Nine days later, on 7 December 1975, Indonesia launched a combined military, naval and airborne invasion of East Timor. President Suharto of Indonesia subsequently claimed East Timor as Indonesia's 27th province in 1976.

East Timorese refugees arrive in Australia in 1975

Over the next 24 years East Timor was under military occupation. A report presented to the United Nations in 2006 estimated that from a population of 750 000, about 183 000 East Timorese were killed or died as a result of deliberate starvation between 1975 and 1999. In 1991, the massacre of 200 unarmed civilians at the Santa Cruz Cemetery in Dili and the killings and repression that followed focused international attention on East Timor.

In 1998 President Suharto was forced to resign. His successor, Dr BJ Habibie, in the midst of an economic crisis and in need of international support, proposed limited autonomy for East Timor within Indonesia. This resulted in a set of agreements between Indonesia and Portugal, signed in New York on 5 May 1999, entrusting the Secretary-General of the United Nations with organising and conducting a 'popular consultation' in order to determine whether the East Timorese people accepted or rejected a special autonomy for East Timor within the Republic of Indonesia.

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3. EAST TIMORESE RESISTANCE

Fretlin and the resistance army Falintil (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor) opposed Indonesian occupation and engaged in an ongoing guerrilla war.

Xanana Gusmão, the Fretlin leader, was arrested in 1992 and sentenced to life imprisonment in Indonesia.

The East Timorese Catholic Church, under Bishop Carlos Filipe Belo, after 1983 spoke out against human rights abuses.

Jose Ramos-Horta left East Timor shortly before the Indonesian invasion to bring the country's plight to the rest of the world. He was involved in the passing of a dozen United Nations resolutions on East Timor.

In 1996, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded jointly to José Ramos-Horta and Bishop Belo.

Nobel Laureate Bishop Carlos Belo with his congregation on Christmas Eve, 1999

4. AUSTRALIAN CONTACT WITH EAST TIMOR

Australian troops known as 'Sparrow Force' fought the Japanese in East Timor during World War II, 1942–1945. Sparrow Force was supported by the Timorese population – around 70 000 of whom were killed.

In 1975, five reporters working for Channel 9 and Channel 7 in Australia were killed during Indonesian military incursions into the town of Balibo in East Timor. They came to be known as the Balibo Five.

Australia recognised the Indonesian claim to East Timor in 1978, the only country in the world to do so.

Many East Timorese sought asylum in Australia during the period of Indonesian rule.

Australian Troops in East Timor during the World War II

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