Australia looks after a wayward region

We’re in the wars

Tim Lindsay and Jeremy Kingsley

AST Timor is a tiny place, just 220km from end to end. A population of 1,040,880. Only one major government building, and you can drive across the capital, Dili, in minutes.

And yet it is a country deeply divided, fractured and fragmented. Fault lines cross-cut a traumatised society and are the source of entrenched and violent resentments that cannot be resolved quickly or easily.

Take, for example, long-standing tension between eastern (Lorosae) and western (Loromono) groups.

The eastern hills were the base for resistance against Indonesia, and so the Lorosae see themselves as national savours, asserting special rights to power.

This is a root cause of the virtual civil war that has now broken out. Easterners sacked westerners in the national Defence Force, and the westerners, headed by the Australian-trained Major Alfredo Reinado, rebelled, taking up positions in the hills and launching attacks.

The well-armed police, also Australian-trained, and especially Police and Interior Minister Lobato, have been stirring things up with the army.

Now they find themselves caught up in the military’s internal crisis, because it is their role to maintain civil order.

Then there is the division between Fretlin, the ruling party, and other political groups. Fretelin is the for-

mer socialist government that became the guerrilla resistance after the Indonesian invasion in 1975, and which won a landslide in the 2001 Consultative Assembly elections.

Its opponents are weak, but they have support, including among the remnants of the one-fifth or so of the population that didn’t vote for independence in 1999.

Then there is the intense resentment of the majority ethnic Timorese, who speak mainly Tetum or Indone-
sian, towards the urban mestizo Portuguese-speaking elite who disproportionately dominate government and public service posts and have made Portugese the language of state.

And don’t forget the bitter in-fighting within the Fretelin government itself, which is a frequent target of corruption allegations.

Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri is a Muslim in a fiercely Christian society. An effective and ruthless political operator, he is widely hated. He was challenged only last week by Jose Luis Gutierrez, ambassador to the UN and US.

Alkatiri changed the rules of the leadership selection and kept his position.

He is seen as being in conflict with President Xanana Gusmao, the eccentric and popular former guerilla leader, now incapacitated by a back ailment.

Jose Ramos Horta, the suave Foreign Minister, is seen as siding with Gusmao, but he is also a crafty player.

The past week has seen bitter conflict and, reportedly, shooting matches in Cabinet, leading to the ill Gusmao seizing authority over the armed forces from his Prime Minister.

Into this mess, a force of at least 1300 Australians are charged with restoring order in the tiny country.

For the second time in a half a decade, the ADF’s task will be tough, even assisted by forces from Macau, Portugal and New Zealand.

The troops will probably stop the shooting, but the sources of the deep political, cultural and social divisions that set Timor off on an even deeper for peacekeepers to fix. The implications of this for Australia are serious indeed.

Since 1999, Australia has spent about $4 billion on overseas military missions, including in East Timor, Bougainville, the Solomons, Iraq and Afghanistan. More than $1.5 billion went on our last deployment in Timor.

According to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, this latest adventure for “the deputy sheriff” will add a further $200 million. And that is without counting the aid bill, currently more than $40 million annually.

But it is the long-term consequences that are most significant. Like it or not, East Timor is on the way to becoming, effectively, a de facto Australian protectorate, like the Solomons and Bougainville and maybe PNG — and we won’t be able to leave any time soon.

Our reasons for going into these countries are the best: development assistance, humanitarianism, and conflict-prevention. And we can hardly say no when a democratically elected neighbour government pleads to be saved from armed rebel soldiers.

But the outcome is a long-term commitment to prop-
ing up failing states in our region. And that gets much harder to manage.

The Indonesians see this as neo-colonialism, and so, too, do many of the people we are helping.

Contrary to media re-
ports, Australia is not all that popular in East Timor.

We are seen as having been in bed with Indonesia during its occupation, as arriving too late in 1999, and now as being greedy and unwilling to share oil revenues from the Timor Gap.

E are already paying a price for being seen as neo-colonialists. Indonesia and many ASEAN partners, and even the French, are deeply sus-
picious of our motives in the Asia-Pacific region, espe-
cially those involving Papua.

This will not be the last time our troops are sent to bail out East Timor or other regional island states.

So we need to start thinking harder about what we can do to stabilise and develop the troubled micro-
states we have sponsored or helped create in our region.

It won’t be easy. But if we don’t do so, the costs in soldiers, money and regional politics will just keep getting bigger and bigger.

We need to find a way to keep our region together that doesn’t always involve gunboat diplomacy.

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Risky business: Diggers protect Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta (centre)