



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## U.S. Activists campaign to support the East Timorese independence movement, 1991-1999

December

1991

to: September

1999

**Country:** United States

**Location Description:** *Actions occurred across the country*

### Goals:

The campaign goals were to pressure the U.S. government to halt military aid to Indonesia, as well as to pressure them to halt human rights abuses and to allow for a referendum on East Timorese self-determination.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 015. Group lobbying › phone banking

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches › speaking tour
- 016. Picketing › at an APEC conference in Seattle, WA
- 032. Taunting officials › While visiting the U.S.

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 015. Group lobbying › phone banking
- 016. Picketing › In solidarity with an APEC sit-in in Indonesia, and in response to a visit to the U.S. by President Suharto
- 032. Taunting officials › While visiting the U.S.
- 034. Vigils › outside of Indonesian embassies across the U.S.
- 177. Speak-in

### Methods in 4th segment:

- 015. Group lobbying › phone banking

### Methods in 5th segment:

- 015. Group lobbying › phone banking

### Methods in 6th segment:

- 015. Group lobbying › phone banking

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television

**Notes on Methods:**

The nature of the direct action is unclear. While protesters most likely picketed, further tactics in those instances are not known.

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Democracy

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

**Group characterization:**

- Demographics unclear - though seemed to be a mixture of members of religious organizations and social activists

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

East Timor Action Network

**Partners:**

Not known

**External allies:**

International Federation of East Timor (IFET), Asia Pacific Coalition for East Timor (APCET), Amnesty International, Indonesian Legal Aid Society (LBH) and the human rights nongovernmental organizations Solidamor and the Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy (ELSHAM)

**Involvement of social elites:**

Some U.S. members of Congress supported the campaign by introducing legislation to the U.S Congress.

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- East Timor Action Network

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- Amnesty International

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

- International Federation of East Timor (IFET) and Asia Pacific Coalition for East Timor (APCET)

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

- Indonesian Legal Aid Society (LBH) and the human rights nongovernmental organizations Solidamor and the Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy (ELSHAM)

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**

The precise time in which each group joined is unknown. Also, many of these organizations were involved in their own campaigns, or aiding the activists in East Timor in other ways outside of the campaign in the U.S.

**Segment Length:** 1 year and 3 months

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

The United States federal government

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

None found

**Campaigner violence:**

None found

**Repressive Violence:**

None found

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

2 points out of 3 points

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East Timor, a portion of the Indonesian archipelago, was colonized by Portugal in the 16th century. It was not until 1975 that Portugal decolonized the area, at which point East Timor declared independence. Shortly after this, however, the Indonesian army, under the orders of Indonesian President Suharto, invaded and annexed East Timor. 60,000 East Timorese were killed or died of starvation during the invasion.

East Timorese people resisted the occupation even at the start of the invasion, largely in the form of guerrilla organizations engaging in armed conflict with the Indonesian military. The main organization was the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN). One of Suharto's justifications for annexing East Timor was based on a claim that FRETILIN was a communist threat to both East Timor and to Indonesia.

International response was scattered and lacking in potency. The UN Security Council passed two resolutions (resolution 384 in 1975 and resolution 389 in 1976) recognizing East Timor's right to self-determination and calling on Indonesia to withdraw, but Indonesia, as well as most western governments, ignored the resolutions.

By the late 80's, East Timor's status began to show up more on the international stage. This was partly because in 1989, President Suharto opened up the territory to foreigners. Furthermore, the Cold War was ending, offering political space to divorce Indonesia's occupation from anti-communist precautions. In 1988, the East Timorese resistance had also started instituting a nonviolent program to gain international attention for their struggle for self-determination. This was largely led by the National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRM) and the National Resistance of East Timorese Students (Renetil) (For more information, see the case "East Timorese activists campaign for independence from Indonesia, 1987-2002"). In October of 1988, a bipartisan group of 182 House members in the United States House of Representatives sent a letter to George Schultz, the Secretary of State under President Ronald Reagan, calling on the administration to address human rights abuses in East Timor. Senate members sent another letter in 1989. Despite these pleas, the Reagan administration increased arms sales to Indonesia.

It was not until 1991 that international governments started to take notice of East Timor. On November 12, 1991, Indonesian troops opened fire on a funeral procession in Dili, East Timor's capital, killing over 250 people. Two American journalists witnessed the massacre, and a British cameraman was able to capture it on film. The story circulated throughout the world, inciting international outrage. The United States Congress adopted a resolution calling for the suspension of military training support for Indonesia.

In December of 1991, a small group of U.S. activists created the East Timor Action Network (ETAN) in response to the Dili massacre. They called on the U.S. government to halt military assistance to Indonesia as a way of pressuring the Indonesian government to end human rights abuses, and to allow for East Timorese self-determination. In order to do this, they needed to make the East Timorese self-determination a priority in the US-Indonesian relationship. At this point, most international dialogue about East Timor was around human rights abuses, not self-determination.

In February of 1992, they launched a campaign to stop the US training of Indonesian military forces through the International Military Education and Training Program (IMET). Activists in Rhode Island pressured a local Congress member to introduce a resolution banning IMET training. After Brown University students made phone calls to tens of thousands of people to pressure their congress-people, the bill ended up passing in October of 1992. Still, the Pentagon continued to train Indonesian military officials under the Joint Combined Exchange Program (JCET) until journalists exposed the program in 1998.

Over the next two years, ETAN held public meetings around the country, and organized a speaking tour with East Timorese activist Contancio Pinto in order to raise awareness about human rights abuses in East Timor. They circulated East Timorese stories and tried to expose U.S. involvement with the Indonesian military. In July of 1993, ETAN successfully pressured the State Department to block the transfer of F-5 fighter plans to Indonesia, and to ban small arms deals in 1994 (the details of this "pressure" are as yet unknown).

In November of 1993, Suharto traveled to Seattle, Washington, to attend an Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting and was met by U.S. protesters (details of the protest unclear).

ETAN also began to network with solidarity groups around the world, and ended up forming the International Federation of East Timor (IFET) to coordinate global solidarity efforts. This federation also included sub-organizations, such as the Asia Pacific Coalition for East Timor (APCET), which worked with countries that neighbored East Timor to support self-determination. In July of 1994, Amnesty International presented a statement to the UN Committee on Decolonisation that confirmed reports of torture, beating, death threat, and rape throughout East Timor.

In November of 1994, while 29 East Timorese activists were sitting in at the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, ETAN coordinated phone calls to the White House, State Department, and congress-people to demand that the U.S. guarantee the safety of the activists. Additionally, activists in London, Amsterdam, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco all coordinated acts of civil disobedience at Indonesian embassies and consulates in solidarity with the Jakarta activists (the nature of the civil disobedience is unclear). Throughout 1994, ETAN organized vigils at Indonesian and U.S. government offices, and on December 7, the 19th anniversary of Indonesia's invasion of East Timor, they organized pickets at every Indonesian embassy and consulate in the country.

In a 1995 visit to the U.S., President Suharto was again met with protests. At a conference organized by the Indonesian government and several U.S. corporations in Houston, Texas, several ETAN activists were able to get inside and publicly question Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas on the East Timor issue.

By 1995, there were East Timor solidarity groups in over 20 countries. Sweden, the Netherlands, Ireland, Britain, and Germany were all pressured to stop weapons sales to Indonesia. In 1996, four British women even broke into the groups of British Aerospace and, using household hammers, destroyed a Hawk ground attack fighter jet that was bound for Indonesia.

The international network also worked with Indonesian civil society organizations, such as the Indonesian Legal Aid Society (LBH) and the human rights NGOs Solidamor and the Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy (ELSHAM). These groups supported East Timorese activists in Indonesia and relayed human rights information to the media.

A turning point in Western governments' policies toward East Timor occurred in 1996. That December, the leader of the Catholic Church in East Timor, Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, and East Timorese diplomat Jose Ramos-Horta were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. When they each accepted the prize, they called on the international community to support a referendum on East Timor's right to self-determination. U.S. House representative Tony Hall presented a bill to congress calling for the right of East Timor to self-determination, while others wrote to President Clinton urging him to push for East Timorese self-determination. In 1997, following a 5-month long ETAN lobbying campaign, Congress voted to bar U.S.-supplied weapons to East Timor. Five months later, on May 21, 1998, Suharto resigned and was succeeded by B.J. Habibie as president. Some argue that Suharto's fall was partially due to the reduction in aid that Indonesia was receiving, as well as the pressure foreign governments were putting on the Suharto regime. The day after Suharto's resignation, the U.S. Senate unanimously called on Habibie to support an "internationally supervised referendum on self-determination."

Due to both internal and external pressure, Habibie offered independence as an option in January of 1999, and on May 5, 1999, an agreement was signed between Indonesia, Portugal, and the UN calling for a UN-supervised referendum on the status of East Timor. ETAN worked with the International Federation of East Timor to organize an observer project in which they maintained a visible presence in East Timor, hoping to deter violence, and documenting Indonesia's attempts at undermining the vote on the referendum. 98% of registered voters turned out to vote, and close to 80% of East Timorese voted for independence. However, the day after the vote, Indonesia-back militias invaded East Timor and instituted a scorched-earth campaign that led to huge displacement. The U.S. refused to support the sending of UN peacekeepers to East Timor, leading to demonstrations across the globe. ETAN organized another phone bank bombarding the White House and Congress with calls. On September 9, 1999, the Clinton administration suspended military ties with Jakarta and demanded that it accept an international peacekeeping force. Within 24 hours, Indonesian Armed Forces chief general Wiranto conceded.

## Research Notes

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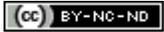
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