

17. East Timor—The First Nation to Declare Independence in the 21st Century

This historical background is closely tied with East Timor's desperate fight for independence, a struggle that continued until the end of the 20th century.

In the 16th century, the Portuguese and the Dutch came to this island in search of highly valued sandalwood. Portugal concentrated on trading with East Timor while the Netherlands traded with West Timor. Portugal put great effort into managing the colony by teaching Portuguese and preaching Christianity, and inserted East Timor into the Portuguese block politically, economically and culturally. The Netherlands turned West Timor into their colony and expanded the Dutch block.

After World War II, colonies all over the world were liberated and became independent. The former Dutch colonies in this area became independent as one nation, Indonesia. Because West Timor used to be a Dutch colony, it became part of Indonesia. The concept of Indonesia and the Indonesian race did not exist until the people unified in the struggle for independence. Indonesia became a unique country with hundreds of races and tribes, using hundreds of different languages, living on hundreds of islands, without a common identity except the fact that the country used to be a Dutch colony.

East Timor, however, remained Portuguese. Indonesia waited for a chance to make East Timor part of its territory. Portugal lost most of its colonies and was no longer a powerful force in Asia. This gave birth to the autonomy and independence movement of East Timor. Then the Indonesian military moved into East Timor and in 1976, it declared that East Timor was the 27th state of the Republic of Indonesia.

International society did not turn a blind eye to this reckless action. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) immediately responded by an assembly resolution and criticized Indonesia through a statement, demanding immediate withdrawal from East Timor and the return of freedom to the people of East Timor to exercise their self-determination and gain independence. Only in November, 2000 did Indonesia finally revoke its annexation declaration, saying that they also suffered many casualties and wanted to improve their reputation in the international community.

Ninety-one percent of the people in East Timor are Catholics. The independence movement was led by the Catholics and, in particular, by Bishop Carlos Belo, the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize winner.

By 2001, the Indonesian military had withdrawn from East Timor and the United Nation's Temporary Administration for East Timor (UNTAET) was provisionally