

The Santa Cruz Massacre

The World Wakes Up

A delegation from the Portuguese Parliament was expected in Dili in November 1991. There were rumours of a possible meeting between the delegation and Xanana Gusmão, and activists prepared for protests to bring their problems before those who could help. One group of young people painted banners and placards in the grounds of the Motael Church in Dili.

An altercation with the Indonesian military took place on 28 October and one of the group's members, Sebastião Gomes, was shot and killed. The visit of the Portuguese delegation was cancelled, but on 11 November the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture was in Dili. The young people decided to proceed with a demonstration to commemorate the killing of their friend Sebastião. They attended Mass at the Motael Church on the morning of 12 November 1991, two weeks after his murder, a normal commemoration for a dead person known in Timor as "Bitter Flowers". There were strict efforts to ensure the demonstration remained peaceful and disciplined.

Indonesian military, police and intelligence agents watched the march from the Motael Church, along the waterfront about two km south to the Santa Cruz cemetery. Some joined the group along the way and still others gathered at the cemetery itself. Banners were unfurled calling for the UN's involvement in Timor- Leste, supporting Xanana Gusmão and self-determination. Shooting started once students arrived at the Santa Cruz cemetery. Soldiers opened fire with automatic weapons into the unarmed and peaceful crowd, many of whom fled into the grounds of the cemetery. Soldiers surrounded the cemetery, entering and killing previously unharmed or lightly injured people by bayonetting them. A survivor of the massacre recalls:

Many were killed in the cemetery but many more were killed outside the cemetery while they were running away or were taken from their hiding places in homes and other places, and murdered.

Many young people were taken away in trucks, to the military hospital, to interrogation centres, or simply to be killed. Hundreds of young people ran to Bishop Belo's residence seeking refuge. There was a series of killings over the following days as Indonesian security forces hunted down those they suspected of involvement in the protest. I

The Commission headquarters in the former Balide Prison was used to hold many people who were arrested in the days and weeks that followed. Some were brought to trial and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

It is believed that number of people killed on the day of the massacre was 271, with 250 listed as missing. Indonesian authorities initially determined that 19 people were killed at Santa Cruz, and in the face of international outcry at this cover-up increased its figure to 50. Further evidence that senior members of the Indonesian military leadership condoned the massacre came on 14 November the Indonesian Armed Forces Commander Try Sutrisno was quoted as telling graduates at the Indonesian military academy that "*Delinquents like these have to be shot, and we will shoot them*".

News of the massacre at Santa Cruz circulated around the world quickly, and led to a dramatic rise in solidarity action. Some governments, notably Australia, worked to support the Indonesian explanation that this was an uncharacteristic action by "rogue elements" within the military. Despite this, the massacre and the focus it brought to the wider issue of Indonesia's occupation of Timor- Leste was a public relations disaster for Indonesia. The 12th of November became a rallying day for East Timorese in the diaspora and human rights activists in countries throughout the world right up to 1999, with anniversaries being marked by demonstrations and vigils.

