

## 7 December 1975: the politics of remembering

*Pat Walsh, 8 December 2008*

A key principle of both good memorialisation and reconciliation is that the truth be honestly acknowledged in plain language. Memorialisation that seeks to enhance by euphemism or to evade compromises both the lessons of history and the building of understanding and healthy relationships. Such memorials obfuscate rather than enlighten. They might defuse in the short term but they can also confuse and undermine trust.

Thirty three years ago this week, those of Dili's 30,000 citizens still in the capital woke up to a real life nightmare. Around 3 am on Sunday, 7 December 1975, Indonesian warships opened fire on Dili after sailing into Timor's waters under cover of darkness. Around 4.30 am, 400 Indonesian marines in amphibious tanks and landing craft stormed the Kampung Alor beach along the stretch now occupied by the Esplanada, Dili Beach, Casa Minha restaurants and other popular spots. At 6 am, 9 Hercules dropped paratroopers over the site of the new Chinese built presidential complex, then returned around 8 am. Following skirmishes with Fretilin forces, ABRI troops terrorised citizens by conducting a number of mass and individual executions in parts of Dili well known to many today – the parks and port in front of Hotel Timor, Colmera shopping centre, buildings at various points along the Obrigado Barracks road, Matadouro, and the Maloa River in Bairro Pite, to name some.

Codenamed Seroja or Lotus (who dreams up these terms?), there was nothing about the invasion to justify any association with this sacred flower, famed for its beauty and fragrance. On the contrary, as a careful reading of the CAVR report *Chega!* makes clear, the assault on Dili was a disaster from every point of view – militarily, morally, legally, politically and internationally. ABRI blew its surprise moves, operated on bad intelligence, dropped its paratroopers in the wrong places, had its troops firing on each other, sustained significant loss of troop life, terrorised the city it had come to liberate, earned the condemnation of the UN, violated the Geneva Conventions and human rights, executed unarmed civilians and alienated a people who might have responded differently to less brutal behaviour. As the then anti-Fretilin Bishop of Dili famously said: 'Indonesian paratroopers descended from heaven like angels but then behaved like devils'. Indonesia knew it was out of order. It invaded furtively by not declaring war, and with a guilty conscience removed insignia from its vessels and troops, used AK-47s not traceable to the US, its principal military sponsor, and claimed that its troops were 'volunteers'. It also attacked on a Sunday. Did the military who spent hours and weeks planning this adventure think they might catch the Timorese on their knees? Major-General Benny Murdani toured Dili the following day. He later described the operation as 'embarrassing' and criticised the troops for 'not displaying discipline'.

The invasion of Timor-Leste was probably Indonesia's biggest military operation and was certainly its most costly in every sense. For Timor-Leste it was the opposite of Seroja, a bouquet of bullets not flowers.

Neither Indonesia nor Timor-Leste, however, have chosen to remember the attack on Dili for what it was – an embarrassing exercise in war crimes, aggression and incompetence. Both have chosen to ignore the ugly truth. Indonesia held no-one

accountable, including for the deaths of its own troops, and through the inauguration of the Seroja Memorial in Jakarta on 10 November 2002, National Heroes Day, has elected to remember the event in heroic terms, code for 'we did nothing wrong'. Timor-Leste has also chosen not to press the point. 7 December is officially commemorated as Timor-Leste heroes day, deflecting public attention away from Indonesia. The people of Dili are left to remember the reality as best they can and to puzzle how both sides could have covered themselves in glory that fateful day.

*For an account of the attack on Dili on 7 December 1975, see [Chega!](#), Part 3 History of the Conflict, pp 60-67 and other references passim, e.g. chapters on self-determination and killings in Part 7. Website: [www.cavr-timorleste.org](http://www.cavr-timorleste.org)*

*Comment on 7 December 1975*