

# REMEMBERING SANTA CRUZ

Hundreds of Timorese youth were killed in the Santa Cruz cemetery massacre on 12 November 1991

## The Santa Cruz Massacre - 30 years on

November 12<sup>th</sup> 2021 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre at the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili, Timor-Leste.

This was the event which finally roused the world to what had been going on in East Timor since 1975. The Indonesian occupation had accounted for tens of thousands of Timorese lives, but the rest of the world generally ignored the disaster.

A delegation from the Portuguese Parliament was expected to arrive in Dili in November 1991. There were rumours of a possible meeting between the delegation and Xanana Gusmão, the resistance leader. Young people prepared to bring their problems before those whom they thought would help. One group painted banners and placards in the grounds of the Motael Church in Dili. An altercation with the Indonesian military took place there on 28 October and one of the group's members, Sebastião Gomes, was shot and killed.

For various reasons 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. This was two weeks after his murder, and for Timorese people it marks a particular commemoration for the dead known as "Bitter Flowers". After Mass they left the church and made their way along the waterfront about two kilometres to the Santa Cruz cemetery.



A survivor

Indonesian military, police and intelligence agents watched the march from the Motael Church. Some more Timorese joined the group along the way and still others gathered at the cemetery itself. Banners were unfurled calling for the UN's intervention, supporting Xanana Gusmão and self-determination.

Click here for [Max Stahl's footage](#) of the demonstration and attack. over...



The Church at Motael in Dili, where the young people gathered for Mass before the walk to the cemetery and the demonstration.

## Santa Cruz *cont.*

Once the unarmed and peaceful group arrived at the cemetery soldiers opened fire with automatic weapons. Many young ones fled into the grounds of the cemetery or into nearby houses. Soldiers surrounded the area, killing previously unharmed or lightly injured people by bayonetting them. They also went house-to-house, searching for the protesters. 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 of the youth were taken away in trucks, to the military hospital, to interrogation centres, or simply to be killed. Hundreds 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. Many were arrested in the days and weeks that followed. Some were brought to trial and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

The number of people killed on the day of the massacre is 271, with 250 others listed as missing. Indonesian authorities initially declared that 19 people were killed but in the face of international outcry increased the figure to 50.

Further evidence that senior members of the Indonesian military leadership condoned the massacre came on 14 November when the Indonesian Armed Forces Commander, Try Sutrisno, was quoted as telling graduates at the Indonesian military academy that *"Delinquents like these agitators have to be shot, and they will be, whenever necessary"*.<sup>1</sup>

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's, supported the Indonesian explanation that this was an uncharacteristic action by "rogue elements" within the military. Nevertheless, the massacre brought attention to the wider issue of Indonesia's occupation of East Timor.

In the years that followed, November 12th became a rallying day for East Timorese and human rights activists in countries throughout the world, with anniversaries being marked by demonstrations and vigils.

A British cameraman and film maker, Max Stahl, was at the cemetery that day. He filmed Indonesian troops shooting the demonstrators, chasing them and beating them. He buried the footage of the massacre in the cemetery and dug it up during the night, smuggling it out to the BBC the next day.

Seeing is believing. It was irrefutable proof of the brutal oppression of the Timorese people.



Image taken from [Max Stahl's film](#). The young people are falling over each other as they escape the bullets.

Their testimony and that of those who supported them was finally shown to be true.

The massacre and its recording ultimately contributed to the collapse of Indonesian control in Timor-Leste, which then became independent in 2002.



Timorese people commemorate the anniversary of the Santa Cruz massacre. Many mourners carry photographs of loved ones who died or disappeared. UNMIT Photo/Martine Perret

See: <https://www.etan.org/etanpdf/2006/CAVR/03-History-of-the-Conflict.pdf> from p.115

1. Rodney Tiffen, *Diplomatic Deceits: Government, Media and East Timor*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 46.