

Excerpt about Suai Church Massacre, September 6, 1999

East Timor 1999 Crimes against Humanity

A REPORT COMMISSIONED BY THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF THE
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (OHCHR)*

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*This report has been referenced many times by CAVR and since it is as yet unpublished it is included here in its entirety. The text is identical to that received from OHCHR, but fonts and styles have been altered to fit with the typesetting design of the CAVR report. As of October 2005, an updated version of this report was also due to be published in English and Indonesian by Asosiasi Hak, Dili, Timor-Leste. For more information Asosiasi Hak can be contacted through their website: www.yayasanhak.minihub.org

10.10 Suai Church Massacre (September 6, 1999)

The District of Covalima was the scene of widespread human rights violations both before and after the ballot in 1999. The worst single incident in the District, and among the worst in the country, was the massacre at the Ave Maria church in the town of Suai on September 6, 1999.*

At least 40 people, but possibly as many as 200, were killed in the massacre.† Of the 40 whose identities were known by late 2002, three were Catholic priests, ten were under the age of 18, and more than a dozen were women. The dead were among some 1,500-2,000 people who had taken refuge at the old church, in the Priest's quarters adjacent to it, and in a new half-built church a few hundred meters away, because of mounting violence and intimidation by militias and security forces.

The key perpetrators of the Suai church massacre, and of the 1999 violence in Covalima generally, were members of the District's main militia group, Laksaur, commanded by Olivio Mendonça Moruk. Some of the perpetrators also belonged to the Ainaro-based militia group, Mahidi, led by Cancio Lopes de Carvalho. But the militias did not operate independently. As in all other Districts, they were formed, trained, supplied, and directed by TNI officers. They also had the financial and political backing of the civilian administration, and the support or acquiescence of the Police and the Mobile Brigades in the District.

The officials with most immediate responsibility for the control of the militias in Covalima, and with direct responsibility for the Suai church massacre, were the Bupati, Col. Herman Sedyono, the Dandim, Lt. Col. Liliek Koeshadianto (a.k.a. Lilik Kushadiyanto), the District Chief of Police, Lt. Col. (Pol.) Gatot Subiaktoro, and the Sub-District Military Commander for Suai, Lt. Sugito. All four men were observed, bearing arms, at the scene of the massacre, and all are alleged to have participated in the attack.‡

Although they were not reported at the scene of the attack, two other military officers arguably share responsibility for the massacre because of their direct role in mobilizing and coordinating militias activities in the District. They are the District Military

* This account is compiled from multiple sources, including: UNMISSET, DHRO-Covalima, "Covalima District: 1999 Report"; Report of the Indonesian Commission on Human Rights Violations in East Timor (KPP-HAM), January 2000; James Dunn, "Crimes Against Humanity in East Timor, January to October 1999 – Their Nature and Causes," February 2001; Deputy General Prosecutor for Serious Crimes, Indictment against Col. Herman Sedyono *et al.*, Dili, April 7, 2003; several witness statements, recorded and compiled by UN investigators in East Timor between 1999 and 2002; and selected media reports of the Ad Hoc Human Rights Trials in Jakarta.

† The KPP-HAM estimates that 50 were killed, while the local human rights organization, Yayasan Hak, places the figure between 50 and 200. The indictment issued in this case says that "between 27 and 200 civilians were killed during the attack." See Deputy General Prosecutor for Serious Crimes, Indictment against Egidio Manek *et al.*, Dili, February 28, 2003, p. 232.

‡ See Deputy General Prosecutor for Serious Crimes, Indictment against Col. Herman Sedyono *et al.*, Dili, April 7, 2003, p. 42. Herman Sedyono acknowledged in a Jakarta court that he was at the church during the massacre, but claimed that he was trying to stop the violence. See AP, July 30, 2002.

Commander until late August, Lt. Col. Ahmad Mas Agus, and a TNI intelligence officer, Sgt. Yus Nampun.

The massacre of September 6 was preceded by several months of tension and violence in the town of Suai, much of it centering on the IDPs in the church. The IDPs had first come to the church in early 1999, following the murder of several CNRT leaders, and a series of militia attacks on villages deemed to be pro-independence strongholds. A group of about 300 IDPs had gone to the church in late June after UNAMET officials facilitated their return to Suai from their places of refuge in the mountains. Throughout this period, the militias, the Bupati, and other pro-autonomy leaders, adopted a hostile attitude toward the IDPs, and toward the priests and nuns who were providing them with sanctuary.

With the announcement of the result of the ballot on September 4, militiamen and the TNI began a campaign of violence that quickly came to focus on the IDPs in the church. Laksaur militiamen began, on September 4, threatening, beating and killing residents of Debos village, in the town Suai, and then looting and burning houses. Some residents fled to the hills, while others joined the hundreds of IDPs already sheltering at the church. At least three people were killed. On September 5, TNI forces, including the Suai Danramil, Lt. Sugito, joined the militia in burning, looting, and firing their weapons in the vicinity of the church. In the course of the day, at least one more person was shot and killed by Laksaur militiamen, and the flow of IDPs swelled.

Starting at about 8:00 a.m. the following day, September 6, Laksaur commanders had a series of meetings with TNI officers, first at the Koramil in Salele, which also served as the militia headquarters in the area, and then at the Kodim in Suai. After the meeting at the Salele Koramil, Laksaur militia members were informed that they would be attacking the Suai church that day. At about 10:00 a.m., Laksaur and Mahidi militiamen armed with machetes, swords and firearms began to gather around the church compound, and to threaten and taunt the IDPs inside. According to witnesses, a militia member entered the compound and told one of the priests (Father Hilario Madeira) that trucks would soon be arriving to transport the IDPs to West Timor. Later the same day, TNI soldiers and Mobile Brigade units arrived and took up positions around the church.

Meanwhile, Laksaur commanders and some militia members had gathered at the house of the Bupati, Herman Sedyono. They were armed with rifles, swords and machetes. At about 2:30 p.m. the militiamen left the Bupati's house and headed towards the church. The Bupati, wearing a TNI uniform and armed with a rifle, followed them to the church in a vehicle.

Inside the church, there was growing anxiety. There had been a number of warnings of a planned attack. One of these came from a militiaman who had entered the compound in the morning in search of his niece, and had urged people to leave while they could. Other warnings came by telephone. The head of the District legislature called to offer assistance in taking the IDPs to safety. Finally, around 12 noon, the priests began to urge the IDPs to pack their things and prepare to leave. Hundreds of younger men,

thought to be the likely targets of an attack, did leave but as many as 1,500, many of them women and children, remained in the church.

Shortly after 2:30 p.m. the attack began. According to witnesses, two grenades were thrown and then the militia and the TNI started to fire their weapons into the church compound. The attack continued for roughly three hours. Witnesses and prosecutors say that several high-ranking officials were at the scene throughout, and participated in the attack. They included: the Bupati, Col. (ret.) Herman Sedyono; the Dandim, Lt. Col. Liliek Koeshadianto; the District Chief of Police, Lt. Col. (Pol.) Gatot Subiaktoro; and the Danramil, Lt. Sugito.*

The first to enter the church were scores of Laksaur and Mahidi militiamen, armed with machetes, swords, knives, and home-made firearms. Immediately behind them were a mixed group of TNI soldiers and militiamen. According to witnesses, the militias headed first toward the priests' and nuns' quarters, adjacent to the old church. As they proceeded they hacked, stabbed, and shot many people in their path. Outside the compound, witnesses said, TNI and Mobile Brigade units maintained a perimeter from which they shot at those fleeing the mayhem.

Several witnesses reported hearing between three and five large explosions, which they believed to be grenades, in the course of the attack. One witness, who was hiding in the priests' quarters, said that a grenade was thrown into Father Hilario's room, after which the room was raked with automatic gunfire.

Among the first to be killed were the three priests, Father Hilario Madeira, Father Francisco Soares, both Timorese, and Father Tarsisius Dewanto, who was Indonesian. The precise circumstances of their killing remain somewhat unclear, but the statements of witnesses indicate that they were clearly identifiable as priests at the time of their murders. In any case, all three were well known in the community, and they were killed in or nearby the priests' quarters of the old church, making it unlikely that there was doubt about their identity.

Witnesses concur that Father Hilario was shot and also stabbed or hacked, by a Laksaur militiaman (Egidio Manek) as he emerged from his room in the priests' quarters. One witness stated that he saw Father Hilario's dead body lying on the floor of the sitting room in the house. Father Francisco is also said to have been stabbed and hacked to death by a Laksaur militiaman (Americo) near his quarters. According to one witness statement, shortly before being killed he implored his attackers to spare the women and children. Father Dewanto, the Indonesian priest, was reportedly killed by gunfire in or near the old church. One witness said that, as Father Dewanto was about to be killed, one of the attackers shouted "Don't kill him! He is one of us!" But the warning came too late.

* Deputy General Prosecutor for Serious Crimes, Indictment against Col. Herman Sedyono, *et.al.*, Dili, February 28, 2003, p. 42. The indictment also names 14 TNI personnel who took part in the killings at the church.

By about 5:00 p.m. the killing had finally stopped. A number of survivors, some of them women, were led out of the compound by militiamen and TNI soldiers. As they walked they were told not to look around them, but they could not help seeing corpses strewn about the compound. One witness said that blood was flowing like a long stream from inside the church, across the compound and all the way to the street outside. From the church, the survivors were taken to the Kodim headquarters, and to a nearby primary school, where they were interrogated. Several of them were held for about eight days, and at least one woman is reported to have been sexually assaulted by a militiaman while in detention.*

Early the following morning, September 7, TNI and militia leaders set about disposing of the bodies and destroying as much evidence as possible. According to one of the indictments issued in the case, those directly involved in the disposal efforts included the former Dandim, Lt. Col. Ahmad Mas Agus, and the Suai Danramil, Lt. Sugito. †At least 27 bodies, and probably more, were placed onto trucks (the type, color and registration numbers of which are known) and driven out of town, across the border to West Timor.

An Indonesian Police officer based in Mettamauk, Wemasa, West Timor, told investigators that trucks loaded with bodies had stopped at his Police post at around 8:30 on the morning of September 7.‡ The witness said that Lt. Sugito, the Suai Danramil, had been present, and had told him that the dead were from the church at Suai. Another witness said that he had seen the bodies being buried near the shore in Alas Selatan village, in the District of Belo, West Timor, at about 9:00 a.m. on September 7. He stated that the burial party was led by Lt. Sugito and included three TNI soldiers and a platoon of Laksaur militiamen from Suai.

In late November 1999, Indonesian investigators went to the site indicated by witnesses, and discovered three mass graves. From these graves they exhumed the remains of 27 people, including 16 men, 8 women, and three others whose gender could not be determined. Among those exhumed were the remains of a child of about 5 years, a young man whose lower limbs and pelvis were missing, and a teen-aged woman who was naked, and whose body had been burned.

In addition to those buried in West Timor, and others allegedly thrown into the sea, an undetermined number of bodies were reportedly gathered together at the Suai church and burned beyond recognition. Investigators who visited the site in late 1999 found what appeared to be charred human bones and skulls. On the basis of this information, and statements gathered from families and local officials, by late 2002 UN human rights investigators had identified 40 people thought to have died in the massacre. However, credible estimates of the total number who may have died range as high as 200.

* The report was made by the victim's father. He identified the militiaman as Alipi.

† Deputy General Prosecutor for Serious Crimes, Indictment against Egidio Manek *et al.*, Dili, April 7, 2003, p. 42.

‡ The officer has been identified as Sgt. Maj (Pol) Kanakadja, Kapolsek Mettamauk, Wamesa.