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Violence in Indonesia

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Robert Cribb

In the six months from October 1965 to March 1966, Indonesia suffered an appalling massacre. In an atmosphere of political tension and ideological retribution, the Indonesian army and associated civilian militia groups wiped out not only the leadership of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) but a large number of its members. Estimates of the death toll range from 100,000 to two million, but the most common estimate of the death toll is half a million. A decade later, the Indonesian army inflicted another appalling massacre, this time on the people of East Timor. After occupying the former Portuguese colony in 1975 and annexing it in 1976, the Indonesian military responded to East Timorese resistance with a campaign of military terror which lasted at an intense level until about 1980 and which persisted in one form or another until Indonesia finally relinquished the territory to United Nations control in late 1999. The most common estimate of the number of dead as a result of the Indonesian invasion is 200,000.

The most common estimate is half a million. Two hundred thousand. What do these figures mean? In this chapter I want to investigate the way in which scholars and others decide on behalf of the historical and political record just how many victims fell in these two cases. My conclusion is that estimating death tolls is a highly uncertain business. fraught with enormous practical and moral difficulties, so that any estimate of the number of casualties in either case should be prefixed with perhaps. Within this broad framework of caution, however, I conclude that whereas a death toll estimate of half a million in Indonesia in 1965-1966 is broadly consistent with the available evidence, the estimate of 200,000 deaths in East Timor does not sustain closer examination. Allowing for a wide range of possible error, it seems likely that the number of East Timorese killed by Indonesian forces in the critical years of 1975-1980 lies somewhere in the vicinity of 50,000, while perhaps another 50,000 died of hunger, privation and general hardship caused directly by the Indonesian occupation.

Dealing in the statistics of mass death raises immensely difficult moral and practical problems. For a start, the very set of treating mass death as an object of statistical analysis implies a dehumanization of the victims, the reduction of a multitude of individual tragedies to a figure which is not only subjected to manipulation and analysis. But statistics carry not even the slightest hint of the horror which individuals felt as they saw soldiers march into their village, search their houses for evidence of enemy, and brutally question their neighbours. Statistics cannot bring to life the horror of gradually realizing that those soldiers mean to kill, perhaps casually and Carelessly, perhaps brutally after rape or torture, perhaps with cold, systematic efficiency. We can imagine, but we cannot know, the horror mixture of fear, anger, sorrow and despair that surged through the bodies of those who knew they were to die soon. Of all this, cold statistics tell us nothing.

The statistics of mass death, moreover, are highly political. We live in a global society in which numbers and statistics have an increasingly central role. Modern society demands numerical precision as a basis for comparative political judgement. Comparison between income and expenditure, comparison between bureaucrats, politicians and managers, comparison between societies, even comparisons between football teams. On the one hand we accept the moral proposition that a single murder is one death too many, yet on the other we attach enormous importance to the scale when it comes to mass killings. Whether in reference to the Nazi Holocaust of Jews and others, the Khmer Rouge killing fields in Cambodia or any of the other mass slaughters in human history, a political significance is almost invariably attached to numerical estimates: those who suggest low figures appear to exonerate the perpetrators, those who suggest high figures appear to exonerate them. In many ways, this political significance is bizarre, because even low figures generally imply crimes against humanity on a horrifying scale. The political significance stems, I suspect, from the fact that the numbers we discuss are truly beyond comprehension: most of us have no more conception of a million deaths than we have of a million dollars or a million kilometres. For most of us, there is actually no conceptual difference between 200,000 deaths and a million, certainly not a conceptual difference comparable to that which we might have between, say, the 19th and the 20th centuries, or between democracy and dictatorship, or between blue and yellow. Precisely because the statistics of mass death are so detached from reality, many people feel a freedom to choose the figure which suits their political tastes in a way that they would never consider choosing between other facts.

Is there any reason, then, to be concerned about accuracy in the statistics of mass death? I think that there is, and for three reasons. First, as I will argue below, any serious attention to statistics requires us to deal closely with individuals and their experiences in a way that is not done in the simple confrontation between alternative totals. This observation is not true of demographic approaches to the issue, but it is true of all other approaches. Second, not only is a commitment to accuracy desirable in principle from a scholar's point of view, but our understanding of the nature of the societies involved - both victims and perpetrators - and their historical development will not be assisted by seriously inaccurate statistics. And third, there is the matter of justice. As historians writing about mass killings, we have two parallel moral responsibilities. On the one hand, we must see that the victims are recognized and that what they died for is acknowledged; murder should not be denied and they should not be appropriated by other groups. On the other hand, however, is a responsibility to those accused of murder, a responsibility to ensure that no-one is maliciously or carelessly accused of a crime he or she did not commit. Blood libel is a crime of scholarship which stands on an equal footing with Holocaust denial. In that this issue is much more than a moral one: the question of how to resolve historical injustice has become increasingly important in world affairs and resolution only becomes more difficult when the basic facts of the injustice are disputed. If, then, it is legitimate to ask aresh how many people died in Indonesia in 1965-1966 and in Timor in 1975-1980, we need to consider in turn the various techniques which are available to us.

There are at least five ways to estimate the number of casualties in genocidal killings. The first, and occasionally the most reliable, is to calculate from the records kept by the
perpetrators of the individual deaths of their victims. This technique rests on a very specific set of circumstances: perpetrators whose recording instincts were both strong and reliable and who had no particular reason to fear that their actions would be held against them at some time in the future. These circumstances are rare, because efficient record-keeping in times of mass murder is rare, and because there is a complex of reasons in each case why record-keepers might inflate or reduce the numbers that they record. We can largely trust the official figures which record the number of people executed by state authorities in the United States, for instance, but we should always be cautious about accepting military reports of enemy casualties. The Nazi and Soviet genocides were conducted in part with a bureaucratic efficiency which made this kind of registration possible, but of course no such record-keeping assists the forensic historian working on Indonesia or East Timor. There is a somewhat ingenious tendency to treat estimates made by the Indonesian government, or by figures close to it, as reliable if they appear to be extreme. Thus a figure of one million deaths in 1965-66 draws credibility from the fact that it is reported on the basis of a still-unpublished Koplanimb report on the killings. Similarly, the estimate of 60,000 deaths in the early part of the Indonesian occupation has been widely taken as proof that the true figure is no less than this amount. Estimates such as these are, of course, part of the evidence on which we can draw to reach a conclusion, but their self-incriminatory nature should not blind us to the fact that they have no especial reliability. Koplanimb and Lopes da Cruz were informed observers, but they were informed primarily by a broad knowledge of the circumstances of the killings, not by secret bureaucratic information. Just as we would reject these authorities if they offered us unduly low figures, we should have some scepticism towards the high figures they present. Whatever plausibility these figures may have comes, as I will argue later, from their relationship to the known circumstances of the killings rather than the intrinsic reliability of those who pronounced them.

The second technique is to count the bodies, or what remains of them. This is a far from reliable technique, because burial places may be unknown (and bodies may have been burnt or dumped at sea). Moreover not all victims of genocide are buried; their bodies may be left exposed in some out-of-the-way place, where they are quickly destroyed by weather and animals. Even if graves can be found, the bones in them may deteriorate rapidly under unfavorable circumstances (acid soils, abundant rainfall) so that after a certain point counting the number of victims becomes impossible. There may also be serious doubt over the identity both of the victims and of those who consigned them to the earth. The killings in Indonesia in 1965-66 and in East Timor were relatively one-sided, so this consideration is not a serious problem in this case. But it is clearly of great importance in complex conflicts such as those in Bosnia. Nonetheless, it has to be emphasized that there is absolutely no graveyard evidence which would support any conclusion that mass killings took place in Indonesia or East Timor. Of course there is good reason why no excavation took place during the New Order period: the Suharto regime may have been happy to admit that hundreds of thousands had died in 1965-66, but it had no wish to allow the specifics of the killings to re-emerge. Still less did it want to admit that mass killings had accompanied the subjugation of East Timor. President Abdurrahman Wahid has been much more open to the possibility of investigating the killings, but this opening has been resisted by powerful forces in his own party which was, of course, heavily involved at the time.

The third technique consists of piecing together the memories of witnesses, including survivors and perpetrators, as well as bystanders. It involves seeking the big picture from a multitude of individual recollections. In the absence of incontrovertible bureaucratic or graveyard evidence, this is the most accurate technique available for establishing dates. This technique, however, is difficult, time-consuming and fraught with methodological problems. It depends on the existence of witnesses, and on the willingness and ability of survivors and perpetrators to talk about their experiences. It depends on a large team of interviewers and recorders—whether formally organized in a large-scale project such as the Cambodian Genocide Program or in smaller projects driven by the interest and obsession of individuals—and on access to means of verifying, storing and disseminating the information which has been collected. Even when these conditions are met, there are problems. On the one hand, the memory of traumatic times may seem to be etched indelibly into the minds of victims and perpetrators, but because of their power to distort, such memories are highly vulnerable to revision and reinterpretation. This fact applies especially to the memories of those who were victimized: their powerlessness often pushes them into a re-ordering of their memories so that there is some structure, meaning or purpose to their time of victimhood. This process can take place without the slightest intent to deceive and victims may believe passionately and unashakably in memories which have in fact been partly constructed. Researchers on Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge have found a very difficult to reconstruct the precise sequence of Khmer Rouge policies and programmes because the memories of Cambodians who were living this way and that by the Khmer Rouge simply do not add up to a coherent or consistent picture.

For Indonesia and East Timor, this recording process has barely begun. Planned to be done by groups in Indonesia and abroad to begin collecting individual testimonies from this time, Peter Carey and others have begun similar work with East Timor. For both cases, we have a number of individual accounts, but these are few and they only constitute a beginning in the process of historical documentation. This state of affairs leaves us to rely on two rather more contentious techniques: demographic and intuition. The demographic approach rests on a careful comparison of known population figures before and after the catastrophe. If the post-catastrophe figure is different from what might have been expected had there been no catastrophe, then it provides a statistical basis for calculating death tolls in the absence of other more reliable techniques. Such a calculation is necessarily a crude one: the difference between the expected and actual populations can be expected to reflect not only the number of people actually killed, but also the number who died prematurely because of privation and disease directly caused by the repression as well as the number who were not born because conditions at the time depressed reproduction rates. Demographic calculation must also
take into account the possibility of out- and in-migration and factors, such as drought or flood, which may be entirely independent of politics. Finally, of course, demographic calculations are only as good as the figures on which they are based.

To my knowledge, there has been no serious attempt to look for the demographic consequences of the Indonesian killings of 1965-66. This failure is, one can imagine, partly because the commonly accepted overall death rate, 500,000 out of a population of 100 million, is too small to show up in a comparison between the 1961 and 1971 censuses, partly because the reliability of the 1961 census is considered doubtful. If we try nonetheless to squeeze the available figures for what we can get, the results are not especially informative. Let us examine the population figures for the East Java rural kabupaten in 1961 and 1971. East Java is widely regarded as a major region of killing, with the massacres concentrated in a limited number of kabupaten. In the absence of detailed reports, it is not easy to say precisely where the killings were most extensive, but these population figures can be grouped according to the strength of the Communist Party (PKI) in the 1957 elections as follows:

Table 1: Population increase in East Java rural kabupaten, 1961-1971, grouped according to PKI vote in regional elections, 1957

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kabupaten</th>
<th>1961 population</th>
<th>1971 population</th>
<th>% increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blitar</td>
<td>839,952</td>
<td>950,802</td>
<td>+ 13.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maduran</td>
<td>593,428</td>
<td>583,610</td>
<td>+ 14.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngawi</td>
<td>582,317</td>
<td>694,079</td>
<td>+ 19.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ponorogo</td>
<td>699,805</td>
<td>738,728</td>
<td>+ 5.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,631,562</td>
<td>2,967,419</td>
<td>+ 12.8 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kabupaten recording >50% PKI vote, 1957

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kabupaten</th>
<th>1961 population</th>
<th>1971 population</th>
<th>% increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bejontengro</td>
<td>708,571</td>
<td>861,362</td>
<td>+ 24.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magetan</td>
<td>498,635</td>
<td>557,081</td>
<td>+ 11.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ponorogo</td>
<td>431,022</td>
<td>476,562</td>
<td>+ 10.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,638,028</td>
<td>1,895,905</td>
<td>+ 15.7 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kabupaten recording >40% PKI vote, 1957

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kabupaten</th>
<th>1961 population</th>
<th>1971 population</th>
<th>% increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banyuwangi</td>
<td>1,663,533</td>
<td>1,303,982</td>
<td>+ 22.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kediri</td>
<td>918,036</td>
<td>1,080,695</td>
<td>+ 17.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nganjuk</td>
<td>675,906</td>
<td>774,426</td>
<td>+ 14.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumberaya</td>
<td>666,002</td>
<td>666,474</td>
<td>- 0.8 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results show a slightly depressed rate of population increase for the kabupaten which had the highest proportion of communist voters in 1957. The five most communist kabupaten - Blitar, Magetan, Maduran, Ngawi and Ponorogo - have a combined population which is perhaps 5% below what might be expected, a loss of perhaps 176,000 people, but within this group there is great variation and only Ponorogo with a population growth rate of 5.6% stands out as a region of startlingly low growth. Kediri, reputed to have had a high death rate, has a thoroughly respectable growth rate of 17.7%.
It is possible that we can see in the figures above the faint shadow of massacres in 1965-66, but to do so takes an effort of will and faith, rather than simply statistical interpretation.

For East Timor, by contrast, the demographic evidence seems at first glance to point to a truly horrific death toll. A Portuguese census in 1970 had shown a population of 609,477 in East Timor, and the Catholic Church in 1974 updated this figure to an estimate of 688,771. In December 1978 Indonesian authorities reportedly estimated the population at 329,271. When this figure aroused alarm, it was apparently revised upwards to 498,433 to include people who had fled to the mountains where they lived outside Indonesian control. A count by the Catholic Church in 1980 put the total population of the territory at 425,000. The 1980 national census found about 555,350 people in East Timor, while an Indonesian investigation led by Professor Mulyanto concluded that the population in 1987 was 657,411. The conclusion seemed inescapable: the population of East Timor had declined by more than 130,000 between 1974 and 1980. Allowing for a natural growth rate of 1.8%, the population in 1980 should have been 753,000.

Even allowing for a certain margin of error in these statistics, this means that more than 200,000 Timorese (nearly a third of the population of the territory) died in the first five years of Indonesian occupation, as a consequence of the invasion, the war, the transfers and areas (many prisoners were tortured to death), and the hunger caused by the destruction carried out by the Indonesian forces and by the installation of Timorese in concentration camps, without being able to cultivate.

It is true that not all observers accept this figure: Hoith estimates 95,000, while Mackie and Ley manage to summarize East Timorese history from 1975 to 1980 without mentioning any death toll at all. But 200,000 has become the most common estimate of the number of East Timorese who perished as a result of the Indonesian occupation and Benedict Anderson felt confident in writing recently, until it is now well-known that, between 1977 and 1980, about one third of the entire population of the former Portuguese colony died unnaturally.

These calculations, however, present two problems. First, how reliable are the data? Accounts of Portuguese rule in East Timor vary in picture they give, but the range is from cruel and intrusive exploitation to benign neglect, and these accounts seldom arouse the suspicion that Portuguese statistical precision was highly reliable. There is prima facie more reason to imagine that the figures provided by the Portuguese administration are actually understated, because Portugal collected an unpopular poll tax which would have given the East Timorese every reason to avoid being counted. The same is true of the church figures. In 1975, fewer than 50% of the East Timorese population was Catholic, and any church estimate of the population must be seen in the light of its incomplete access to society. The Indonesian figures prior to the 1980 census, too, have little practical value because they do not appear to have been based on a systematic enumeration of the population. It is worth recalling that hundreds of thousands of East Timorese disappeared during the violence of September 1999, only to reappear later. The 1980 census is probably the most reliable figure of all, but it is not clear that it takes into account those Timorese who had managed to evade Indonesian supervision in the interior. Given the experience of East Timorese with Indonesian rule, there is every likelihood that many East Timorese sought to evade the census process altogether, with the result that the 1980 figure is likely to be lower than it was. In any case, a single reliable figure is little use for calculations which require numerical comparison.

The 1980 census figure of 555,350 becomes all the more implausible if one sets it against Mulyanto’s 1987 estimate of 657,411, which implies a population growth rate of about 2.5% – very high given the difficult circumstances in Timor. Other figures mentioned above – 329,271 and 498,433 (Indonesian authorities, 1978) and 425,000 (Catholic Church, 1980) – would require us to believe in still higher annual rates of population increase (10%, 3.2% and 7% respectively). The Catholic Church’s 1974 estimate of 688,771 would require an annual increase of about 3% from the 1970 Portuguese census figure of 609,477. On the other hand, if we take the 1970 Portuguese census figure of 609,477 and set it against Mulyanto’s 1987 estimate we get a population increase of about 0.4% per annum: low, but not impossibly low if one considers the many factors likely to have suppressed birthrates during these years.

A second problem is that the number of ‘missing’, even if it can be calculated accurately, conflates four groups: those who were killed, those who died prematurely as a result of conditions created by the Indonesian occupation, those who fled elsewhere in the world and those who were born at all as a result of those conditions. It is worth noting that, apart from the refugees, this distinction is not necessarily relevant in accusing Indonesia of genocide in East Timor: it is firmly accepted that Jews who died of privation in the Nazi concentration camps were just as much the victims of genocide as those who entered the gas chambers, while the United Nations definition of genocide agreed after the end of the Second World War specifically mentions measures which seriously interfere with the reproduction of an ethnic group. But what proportion can be put in each category?

The killings in Indonesia in 1965-66 were accompanied and followed by the massive detention of political prisoners allegedly linked to the Communist Party. Official figures suggest that the total number detained was 1.8 million, but we know to be wary of such official self-incrimination. It appears, however, that most of the detainees passed through the system rather quickly and that the death from privation was a common fate only amongst the longer term detainees, including those sent to Buru. In East Timor, by contrast, a significant proportion of the rural population was shifted into strategic villages, in other words concentration camps where they could be isolated from the Fretilin guerrillas whom they supported. There was of course nothing new in this technique, which the British had pioneered in the South African war at the beginning of the century and refined during the Malayan Emergency, and which the Americans had adopted with somewhat less success in the Vietnam War. According to Indonesian figures, either 268,641 or 318,921 displaced persons were held in a total of fifteen camps in December 1978. We know that conditions there were very difficult: disease spread easily, the detainees were dragoon by Indonesian forces to work on strategic and economic
projects and they were often not given enough access to their land to grow crops as effectively as they had done earlier. Broader demographic analysis tends to emphasize economic circumstances and cultural conventions as the principal determinants of population levels in the long term, with disease in second place and warfare as a relatively minor element. Of course this generalization does not mean that warfare may not be significant in individual cases, but it suggests that we should not too easily assume that a decline in population was primarily the result of killing.

Indonesia's responsibility for the death rate amongst East Timorese is also clouded by ecological considerations. East Timor is a relatively densely populated region with a dry climate which falls under the influence of the Australian climate. This means that it is affected by the El Niño Southern Oscillation, an irregular, multi-year climatic cycle based in the South Pacific Ocean which produces prolonged droughts and brief episodes of abundant rain in Australia and neighbouring regions. For Timorese on both parts of the island, El Niño tends to bring misery in the form of crop failures and water shortages. An El Niño cycle was just beginning in East Timor at the time of the Indonesian invasion, and it is likely, therefore, that there would have been a significant increase in the death rate, and a decline in the reproduction rate, whether or not Indonesia had invaded, though this is not to say that Indonesian policies did not greatly exacerbate the problem.

In short, a closer examination of the demographic data on East Timor falls far short of proving or even strongly suggesting a death toll from killings and hardship in the order of 200,000. If we take the 1970 census figures and Mulyarso's 1987 estimates as the most reliable amongst a set of unreliable figures, and if we assume a population growth rate of 1.8% before 1975 and after 1980, then the number of missing falls from 200,000 to about 150,000. We know that only a small percent number of East Timorese were able to flee abroad during this period, and we can probably disregard them in the calculations. On the other hand, a serious drop in the birth-rate during this period is highly likely. We have no way of knowing how much the birthrate fell. In 1980 there should have been about 60,000 more East Timorese than in 1975; if the life expectancy of East Timorese at birth was around 50, then about 70,000 East Timorese would have died naturally in 1975-1980. Under these circumstances, about 150,000 East Timorese should have been born in 1975-1980. The disruption to family life caused by the war certainly reduced this figure. We do not know how much, the figure could be between 25% and 50%. These calculations, rougher and more uncertain with every step, suggest that between 42,000 and 65,000 of the missing East Timorese were never born. In the rougher terms, the number of East Timorese who died unnaturally in the period 1975-1980 is more likely to have been in the vicinity of 100,000 than 200,000. Demographic information gives us no grounds for saying how many of these were directly killed and how many died of privation and hardship.

This doubt over the reliability of the census figures in East Timor and the absence of useful demographic data altogether for Indonesia forces us to turn to a final technique for estimating the scale of mass death in these two regions. This technique can be called intuitive, because it relies on a variety of considerations and on a balance of probabilities.

It does not lend itself to precision, but by virtue of its eclecticism it may produce a more reliable answer than any of the other approaches. Intuition is clearly responsible for the general consensus that around half a million people died in Indonesia in 1965-66. The tendency to settle on this figure is intuitive because the figure itself is not based on bureaucratic records, on excavations, on detailed interview work or on demographic calculations. Rather it rests on two considerations.

First is that the number of people killed is likely to lie somewhere between the two extremes. In the case of Indonesia, estimates have generally ranged from 250,000 to one million, with outliers as low as 100,000 and as high as two million. Half a million, sometimes 400,000, gains credibility simply because it is nestled between these estimates. To adopt it implies a sense of moderate judgement, neither unduly harsh nor unduly gullible. This consideration, thus, has absolutely nothing to do with accuracy and everything to do with scholarly and personal respectability. As mentioned earlier, it is an unfortunate feature of scholarly politics that high estimates of death tend to be pushed forward by those most strongly opposed to the regime in question, while low numbers seem to attract those who are less intragated by the events in question. Most scholars, being liberal but not activist, are inclined to choose a figure which seems to register serious concern without requiring outrage. The East Timor case is a little unusual, because the current preferred figure of 200,000 is at the upper end of the common range of estimates, but this fact can perhaps be attributed to the growing conviction following the Dili massacre that the changing international climate might in fact deliver independence to East Timor.

Second — and I hope also more important — is the demand that whatever figure is chosen be consistent with the broad political and social environment within which the killings are known to have taken place. In the case of the Indonesian killings of 1965-66, there has been a general consensus that existing political and social conflicts in the countryside, the anti-communist political programme of the Suharto group within the Indonesian armed forces, and the unusually tense and opaque political environment of late Guided Democracy created conditions in which mass slaughter became possible. Most serious evidence — though this evidence is admittedly fragmentary — suggests that the victims were predominantly communist and left wing activists and that the PKI was effectively wiped out as a political force. Although the party claimed three million members (and many more in affiliated organizations), there is a perception that the active core of the party numbered around half a million. The killings were extensive enough to cause a shortage of teachers in Java and of wood-carvers in Bali, and to leave here and there so-called villages of widows and orphans, but not so extensive as to leave large areas of the country empty. On the other hand, the killings were extensive enough to leave a clear national trauma. This fact is evident in two ways. First, a return to the violence of 1965-66 was one of the deep fears which surfaced in 1998 at the time of Suharto's overthrow. Second, the killings were accompanied by gruesome rituals: the piling of corpses onto rafts, the nailing of genitalia of male communists to shop fronts, the bleeding of witnesses and so on. This kind of behaviour is especially characteristic of
mass killings which go beyond any instrumentalist need to deter; it works to clothe the fact that human beings are killing other human beings in a mask of rationalization which may be necessary to preserve the sanity of the killers. In short, the broader political and social circumstances in Indonesia in 1965 are consistent with a generally accepted death toll of half a million, as indeed they would probably be consistent with a death toll anywhere between 250,000 and perhaps 800,000.

In the case of East Timor, however, intuitive analysis gives very little support to the proposition that 200,000 people died. First, there is a remarkable shortage of detailed testimony on Indonesian atrocities, except in the initial assault on Dili. For that assault we have a multitude of horrible images: people lined up on the jetty and forced to count out loud as they were shot in groups, children removed from the arms of parents who were about to be shot and handed indiscriminately into the crowd, a welcoming party of local Chinese ganged down and so on. As these examples reflect, massacre is a messy business, hard to carry out precisely and efficiently. The disposal of bodies in particular presents major practical problems. All these things tend to generate a multitude of individual stories which, if they can eventually be gathered, present us with a picture of what took place. But beyond Dili, the reported Indonesian atrocities come to us as bare figures - 400 killed here, 600 killed there and so on. This absence of texture may reflect the Indonesian army's success in killing witnesses, but it leaves us uncomfortably without corroborative detail. If we are to accept a high death toll, we must not only believe these bare figures, but we must believe that there were many more such incidents which have remained unreported.

Second, East Timor does not appear - on the basis of news reports and academic accounts - to be a society traumatized by mass death. Loss of life on a huge scale transforms the way in which a society looks at the world; it transformed Cambodia under Pol Pot, it transformed Bali in 1965-66, it even transformed Europe after the First and Second World Wars. Such a transformation is not necessarily for the better and of course we should not assume that the East Timorese will necessarily respond psychologically in the same way as Balinese, or Cambodians, or Westerners might do, but it seems to me that one looks in vain in the visible face of East Timorese society for the change in world view which seems to afflict post-ceasefire societies. The circumstances leading to the Dili massacre of 1991 seem to me to indicate a society which retained its vigorous and indignant in a way which would probably not have been possible if it had been treated as Cambodia was treated under Pol Pot. What one finds, rather, is a post-repression society, a society which has been badly and brutally treated and which is struggling with issues of transitional justice and the construction of a civil society, but not more than this.

Third, there is little in our knowledge of Indonesian society to suggest that Indonesia would have deliberately killed 200,000 or even 100,000 East Timorese, even if East Timor must at times have seemed to the Timorese like hell on earth, with the Indonesians as devils. Absent from East Timor were two of the most important factors in the killings of 1965-66: the deeply-rooted social tensions and the strained political environment of Guided Democracy. The only clear explanatory factor for Indonesian brutality in East Timor is the policy and predilections of the Indonesian military. For some observers, of course, it is easy to believe the Indonesian military capable of any and every possible inhumanity, just as others have believed the same things of communists, but what we know of Indonesian military doctrine and practice would suggest a rather smaller death toll. This is for two reasons. First, even though the revolutionary era doctrine of total people's defense has been overshadowed by growing reliance on military technology and by the social isolation of the Indonesian army from Indonesian society, the idea that it is necessary to win the hearts and minds of the people is still embedded, not only in Indonesian defense doctrine but in the general consensus of international defense science analysis. There was no broad doctrine at work within the Indonesian military to sanction genocide against the East Timorese. Second, throughout the years of occupation, Indonesia consistently refused to take East Timorese nationalism seriously. For most Indonesians it was very difficult to image why East Timorese might want their own small, weak, vulnerable and isolated state rather than joining the powerful, prosperous and multi-cultural venture called Indonesia. For this reason, as in Aceh and Irian Jaya (Papua), Indonesian military analysis consistently blamed gerakan pengasugihan kemanusiaan (GPK) gangs of security disturbers, whom they saw as opportunists roughed essentially separated from society, in order to keep the various GPK groups from society and to make sure that members of society were not tempted to join, the army was capable of hard-handed actions. Nonetheless, the GPK analysis provided no mandate for extensive civilian massacre.

On the other hand, the Indonesian army brought to East Timor an arrogance born of ten years in power in Indonesia and of a systematic government policy to minimize social links between soldiers and civilians. They were fighting in unknown territory; amongst people whose hostility they probably found bewildering and irrational. There are also indications that they had been primed to regard Fretilin as communist and as thus deserving the same fate as the PKI in 1965-66. Amongst the strongest pieces of circumstantial evidence suggesting a high death toll are the scattered reports of ritualized brutality by Indonesian soldiers, for such brutality not only implies that dehydration of the enemy which is generally a necessary element in mass killing but also a boredom with intense violence, a search for new ways in which to make death more terrible which is characteristic of those who have killed much and wish to kill more. There is ambivalent evidence that the experience of massacre in East Timor altered the Indonesian army in other regions. It is clear that combat command in East Timor was considered a hardening and testing experience for military officers, and it seems likely that the Kopassus commander, Prahowo Subianto, developed his reputation for brutality and dirty tricks in East Timor. This fact, alone, however, has no immediate bearing on the death toll. An East Timorese death toll of 100,000 in the five years from late 1975 to late 1980 implies an average of 20,000 killings a year, 400 a week. Since Fretilin's military forces were never large, the majority of these victims would have been civilians. It is likely that the experience of massacre on such a scale would either have had a hardening, brutalizing effect on the soldiers involved or that it would have led to serious moral and
psychological problems for them. Evidence of such problems is inherently difficult to find — we will have to wait for Indonesian medical journals to begin describing cases of Timor trauma — but the information we have so far is at best sparse: very occasional reports of soldiers whose personalities have been warped by their Timor experience. Perhaps the most striking development in Indonesian military doctrine since the invasion of East Timor has been the resort to militias, gangs and para-military units, as seen in Jakarta in 1998 and in East Timor in 1999. None of this is to suggest that the Indonesian army was soft and genic in its treatment of the East Timorese, but simply to point out that a high level of killing in East Timor is not consistent with the very imperfect understanding which we have of the broader circumstances in the territory and in Indonesia as a whole.

We should be clear, however, that what we lack is clear evidence of killing on a massive, genocidal scale comparable to the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews or the Armenian genocide. We do not lack evidence of murder, repression and terror in the Indonesian attempt to incorporate this unfortunate territory.

What figure, then, might be consistent with these broader circumstances? It seems likely to me that a figure of 50,000 killings in East Timor would fit with the evidence currently available to us. It implies that Indonesian forces killed one East Timorese in thirteen during the years 1975-1999, 10,000 a year, 208 a week. Such a figure would be consistent with what we know of the extent of psychological, social and demographic effects on Timorese society, and it suggests a scale of killing which reflects both the army’s sense of impunity and the East Timorese determination to be free. It is hardly a figure which extenuates Indonesia. The figure might be smaller, possibly as few as 30,000, or larger, possibly as many as 80,000. To go still higher or lower would still require us to begin changing assumptions or to challenge what now appear to be facts. To this figure, moreover, we can add perhaps a similar number of deaths from privation as a result of Indonesian re-settlement policies, deaths whose political and psychological impact are probably that of mass shooting, but which can nonetheless be blamed on Indonesia. Absolutely clear, however, is that the figure of 200,000 should be dropped from discussion of the death toll in East Timor. Even if the figures on which it is based were more reliable, it would still conflate those who were killed with those who were never born. In the comparative statistics of genocide, this is a mendacious and unacceptable technique.

Putting a figure on the number of deaths in political catastrophes such as the 1965-66 killings in Indonesia or the 1975-80 conquest of East Timor is enormously difficult. The circumstances of the time make it certain that we will never be able to enumerate each death, and that we will have to depend on uncertain information and debatable assumptions. Under these circumstances, the decision in favour of a particular figure is too often influenced by the political or moral conclusion which that figure would tend to support. My view, however, is that a different moral issue is paramount: given that we need numbers to comprehend mass killing, numbers based on fragile assumptions should be presented tentatively, often prefaced by ‘perhaps’, and we should bear in mind the serious moral consequences of being wrong; if we overstate the number killed we commit blood libel on those we accuse, if we understate it we deprive victims even of the recognition that they died. Only with these implications humbly in mind should we begin the task of estimation.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Doris Jehanski, Henk Schulte Nordholt and Michael Vickery for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. In view of the views expressed here, I should emphasize that none of them bears any responsibility for the argument presented in this paper.


4 Carmel Ridjordjo and Leon Soe Liong, The war against East Timor (London: Zed, 1984), p. 49. The then Indonesian foreign minister, Adam Malik, was reported in the Sydney Morning Herald as commenting, ‘Fifty thousand people or perhaps eighty thousand might have been killed during the war in East Timor... It was war... Thus what is the big fuss?’, Sydney Morning Herald’s April 7, 1977, cited in Arnold Kohn and John Tylor, An act of genocide: Indonesian invasion of East Timor (London: TAPOL, 1979), p. 3.

5 The Cambodia Genocide Program, based at Yale University, was set up in December 1994 to document the killings in Cambodia during the so-called Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime headed by Pol Pot between 1975 and 1979.

6 Amongst the most interesting of these accounts is Pipit Roehijit, An FKI or non-FKI?, Indonesia 60 (1983), pp. 77-82.


8 The four Madurese kebapuranaree Bangkalan, Pamekasan, Sempung and Suratip.


10 Barbudo de Magalhaes, East Timor, p. 53. The figure of 200,000 is repeated in Peter Eglit, Partnership in an evil action: Canadian universities, Indonesia and genocide in East Timor, Brook Street, N2 13.2 (1989/90), p. 61.

11 F. Hirsh, Timor: past and present (Towsonville: Qld: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1985), p. 61; Jamie Mackie and Allison Ley, The East Timor issue: differing

12 As a curiosity it is worth mentioning the booklet, Jean Angelo S. Mota and Octavio Al. O. Soares, The fight for freedom of Timor Leste: a plus trilogy (Vijayakarta: East Timor Students Movement, Study Club, 1997), which states, "The total number of East Timorese people who became the victims by FRETIEN between 1974-76 was 200,000 people." (p. 30).


14 See for example, Jill Jalliffe, East Timor: nationalism and colonialism (St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1978).

15 I see for example, East Timor cologne, in Peter Casey and G. Carter Bentley, eds., East Timor at the crossroads: the forging of a nation (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), p. 163.


17 Kohen and Taylor, p. 87.


19 The El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon has only been recognized widely in recent years, but the climatic problems of Timor were earlier discussed extensively in F.J. Emde, The Timor problem: a geographical interpretation of an underdeveloped island (Geelong: Wolter, 1960), esp. pp. 13-26.

20 Dunn records that some Fretilin activists have claimed a death toll of 500,000, but I have not seen numbers greater than 200,000 cited seriously.

21 See especially Pipit Rokhaj, Am PKI atau non-PKI, Indonesia.

22 For specific descriptions of atrocities in Dili, see Kohen and Taylor, pp. 75-78, 79; Budjandjo and Lien, pp. 15, 24; James Dunn, Timor: a people betrayed (Sydney: ABC, 1996), pp. 251-253, 254-256, 258, 58-69; for atrocities in other parts of East Timor, see Kohen and Taylor, pp. 71, 73, 85; Budjandjo and Lien, p. 28; Taylor, pp. 78-79, 80-81, 87-88, 101-103, Dunn, p. 254; Flowers, p. 61.

23 Rebecca Winters and Brian Kelly, Children of the Resistance (Darwin: AFFET, 1990), is a brief sympathetic account of the suffering of East Timorese under Indonesian rule. It describes the torture of dissidents and the atmosphere of fear under which East Timorese lived, but it makes no mention of deaths in the past, except for an opening general commentary that "over 250,000 people have died as a result of Indonesian occupation.

24 Dunn has sought -- unconvincingly, I think -- to explain Indonesian brutality as a consequence of rabid anti-communism and Muslim antagonism towards Christianity (pp. 260-261).


