

A MOMENT OF REFLECTION: SANTA CRUZ CEMETERY

On 12 November 1991, a peaceful demonstration ended with the shooting of at least 250 young Timorese at the Santa Cruz cemetery. It was the largest and most visible demonstration against the Indonesian occupation since 1975.

Earlier, on 28 October, Indonesian troops had located a gathering of resistance members in Dili's Motael Church. A confrontation between pro-integration supporters and pro-independence activists just outside the Church resulted in one man dead on each side: integration supporter Afonso Henriques and independence activist Sebastião Gomes.

The resistance gathering was in fact preparing for a visit of members of the Portuguese Parliament, to be accompanied by a delegation that included Dutch UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights on Torture, Pieter Kooijmans. A number of foreigners had come to East Timor to observe the delegation, including journalists Amy Goodman and Allan Nairn (USA) and Max Stahl (UK).

On 12 November, these journalists attended a memorial service for Sebastião Gomes, during which several thousand people walked from the Motael Church to the Santa Cruz cemetery. Along the way, members of the group pulled out banners and East Timorese flags in a peaceful and orderly protest.

When the procession entered the cemetery, some continued their protests before the cemetery wall. Around 200 more Indonesian soldiers arrived and opened fire on hundreds of unarmed civilians. Journalists Goodman and Nairn attempted to serve as a

shield for the Timorese by standing between them and the Indonesian soldiers. The soldiers beat them with their weapons, fracturing Naim's skull.

British cameraman Max Stahl managed to catch the massacre on videotape, which was smuggled out to Australia by the Dutch Saskia Kouwenberg. Thus preventing it from being confiscated. TV images of the massacre were shown worldwide, causing the Indonesian government considerable embarrassment.

Two days after the massacre, the commander of the Indonesian forces, Try Sutrisno stated: "The army cannot be underestimated. Finally we had to shoot them. Delinquents like these agitators must be shot, and they will be."

Max Stahl's footage, combined with the testimony of Nairn and Goodman and others, caused outrage and activists around the world organised protests in solidarity with the East Timorese.

At least 250 young Timorese were killed that day. Shortly before the massacre at Santa Cruz, Kamal Bamadhaj, a political science student and human rights activist from New Zealand, was shot at Balide street. In the days after the massacre, many of the wounded were also killed at the hospital. An other 200 young Timorese are still missing.

In now independent Timor Leste, the Santa Cruz massacre is remembered as one of the bloodiest days in their history, the one that drew international attention to their ongoing struggle for independence. The date 12 November is a public holiday: National Youth Day.

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