

CONFLICT-RELATED DEATHS IN TIMOR-LESTE 1974-1999 THE FINDINGS OF THE CAVR REPORT *CHEGA!*

Background

UNTAET Regulation 2001/10, subsequently endorsed by the Timor-Leste National Parliament, required the Comissao de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliacao (CAVR) to inquire into human rights violations that took place between 1974 and 1999 in the context of the political conflicts in East Timor, to establish the truth about these violations and to report its findings based on factual and objective information and evidence collected or received by it.

In 2003, in keeping with this mandate, the Commission launched a statistical inquiry into the number of East Timorese people who died from conflict-related causes 1974-1999.

This inquiry was also conducted to establish an empirical basis for findings about policy, practice and responsibility in relation to human rights violations committed in Timor-Leste. The Indonesian military had long claimed that they were not responsible for the majority of human rights violations during their occupation of Timor-Leste while Timorese advocates and human rights organizations argued otherwise. This debate continues. On 20 January 2006, Juwono Sudarsono, the Indonesian Defence Minister, responded to the CAVR Report by saying: "This is a war of numbers and data about things that never happened..." CAVR and Benetech's Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) have invited the Indonesian government to review their work and engage in an open, technical debate about their findings and methods.

Implementation

The CAVR inquiry into conflict-related deaths was designed and implemented in cooperation with the Human Rights Data Group (HRDAG). The HRDAG is directed by Dr. Patrick Ball and is a project of Benetech (Beneficent Technology), a California-based nonprofit organization. Originally based at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), HRDAG specializes in information technology solutions and statistical techniques to help human rights organizations build evidence-based arguments. It has provided technical assistance to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and to official truth commissions in Haiti, South Africa, Guatemala, Peru, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The CAVR/HRDAG inquiry in Timor-Leste focused on conflict-related deaths, namely (a) famine-related deaths (i.e. deaths due to illness and hunger in excess of what would be expected due to peacetime mortality), and (b) political violence deaths (i.e. killings and disappearances).

The CAVR/HRDAG collected new data and used a methodology that had not previously been applied to Timor-Leste. Previous attempts to estimate conflict-related mortality in Timor-Leste were based on intuitive estimates by informed observers and indirect estimates based on population censuses. The CAVR/HRDAG estimates are based on three new, independent datasets and standard demographic and statistical methods. The three sets of data are:

- the approximately 8000 victim-statements collected by the CAVR;
- a Graveyard Census based on a count of gravestones in 492 graveyards across Timor-Leste;
- a Retrospective Mortality Survey (RMS) of 1,396 randomly selected households in 121 aldeias (neighbourhoods) across the country.

Findings on the death toll

Using the data and methods referred to above, CAVR/HRDAG was able to estimate a minimum conflict-related death toll that is scientifically-defensible. This estimate is that the lowest possible number of conflict-related deaths during CAVR's reference period, 1974-1999, is 102,800 (+/-12,000). Of these estimated

102,800 deaths, approximately 18,600 (+/-1,000) Timorese were either killed or disappeared, while approximately 84,200 (+/- 11,000) died due to hunger and illness in excess of what would be expected due to peacetime mortality.

This minimum conservative estimate is CAVR/HRDAG's principal scientifically based finding. CAVR/HRDAG did not estimate an upper bound limit though it did speculate that the death toll due to conflict-related hunger and illness could have been as high as 183,000.

Additional comments

The following points should be noted:

- There is some uncertainty about these estimates because they are based on sample survey and grave information collected after the conflict. This uncertainty, as is standard in the field of statistics and demography, is expressed by a margin of error.
- The figures are minimum conservative estimates based on the total number of deaths which could be remembered by survivors resident in Timor-Leste in 2004. Many deaths could not be remembered by 2004 due to factors such as there were no surviving relatives, grave markers, or respondents were unable to recount the details during CAVR's data collection period. Most of the conflict-related deaths in Timor-Leste occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s when access to Timor was very limited. At that time, it was only possible to document a portion of the political violence and famine-related deaths which occurred.
- Despite the uncertainty associated with the official mortality estimates published by CAVR, CAVR's national commissioners (with technical guidance from HRDAG) concluded that its own estimates were subject to less uncertainty than previously-available indirect estimates based on population censuses.
- The figures include conflict-related deaths during the 1975 civil war. However, data from this period were not precise enough to allow CAVR/HRDAG to make an explicit estimate about the civil war death toll.
- The statistics are for civilian conflict-related deaths only. They do not include combatants (e.g. Resistance fighters, Indonesian soldiers, officers and police). In line with UNTAET Regulation 2001/10, CAVR/HRDAG focused on human rights violations. CAVR/HRDAG did not have the time or resources to research the killings of combatants which would have required large-scale data collection in West Timor (difficult for security reasons at the time) and other parts of Indonesia.
- Benetec's statistical work for CAVR was peer-reviewed by a panel of leading statistical experts in the USA. This panel included statistics professors from the University of Chicago, Columbia University and Duke University, a former President of the American Statistical Association and a Senior Statistician from the US Committee on National Statistics.

Further information

- See the full CAVR Report, Chap 7.2 (Unlawful Killings and Enforced Disappearances), Chap 7.3 (Forced Displacement and Famine) and Annexe 2 (Data and Statistical Methods): www.cavr-timorleste.org (Portuguese, Indonesian and English)
- See also HRDAG answers to Frequently-Asked-Questions (FAQs) on the death toll in Timor-Leste: http://www.hrdag.org/resources/timor-leste_faqs.shtml

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