Running scared — how the media left Dili

'The militia men shot up the front of Dili's Hotel Mahkota. The message was clear — get out now while you can. This act was enough to trigger the vast majority of the remaining journalists to leave.'

By LIAM PHELAN

THEY GOT back as night fell, a sweaty mass of excited bodies crammed on the back of a high, open-tray Indonesian army truck, waving like conquering heroes to the small crowd outside the Hotel Mahkota in Dili, East Timor.

Watched by stern Indonesian TNI troops with machine guns hanging ominously by their sides, a swarm of around 40 reporters, photographers and camera crew poured off the truck, handing equipment down, whooping and high fiving their colleagues below.

Although many were visibly shaken, and some appeared to be in shock, the overriding atmosphere was one of excitement. It was 1 September 1999 — just two days after the East Timorese voted to separate from Indonesia. The international media had been poking the pressure cooker atmosphere of post-ballot Dili, and tonight they got what they wanted. It had gone off.

The Indonesian army and the militia had been cranking up the pressure in the previous days. They wanted to frighten the media into leaving the country and the stakes had just been drastically upped. Trouble had come.

"It's got ugly," was how one fresh-faced female photographer summed it up as she passed a tangle of camera gear to a worried-looking colleague below.

The group had just been caught in a militia attack near UNAMET headquarters. A British camera crew filmed while militia surrounded a young man, pushed him to the ground and brutally and steadily hacked him to death.

CNN/BBC

TV footage of the BBC's Jonathan Head being beaten by militia in Dili.

Journalists were also targeted in the battle, with the BBC's Jonathan Head tripping up as he fled the oncoming militia. He looked up to find a crazed man with popping eyes swinging a rusty machete towards his skull. Head had enough time to raise his arm to protect himself. At the last second his attacker twisted the machete and brought the flat of the blade onto the reporter's arm.

An American Jakarta-based journalist was surrounded by militia and forced to cower in a ditch. A policeman found him and tried two times to get him through the angry crowd. They were forced back, with militia threatening the American with machetes and guns. The third time, the policeman somehow persuaded them to spare the young man's life, and he made it back to the UNAMET compound.

Others were also caught up in the chaos. As reporters and camera crew rushed inside the Mahkota to file, their stories were relayed to eager listeners hanging around the foyer. It was the last time many journalists ventured out on the streets of Dili, as everybody there realised the stakes had just got higher. Someone was going to be killed.

We were all caught in one of the biggest regional stories of 1999 — a defining moment in the troubled territory's history which promised drama,

significance, and perhaps most important of all in media terms, violence.

But unlike most conflicts, this time the media were operating without backup. There were no "friendly" troops to escort us. The only protection we had was the Indonesian military, which was becoming increasingly open about its support and encouragement of the marauding militia gangs.

Both army and militia wanted all media out. They saw the international press as biased and anti-Indonesian. Indonesian journalists were traitors and anti-patriotic. The army and militia did everything they could to frighten the shit out of journalists without actually killing anyone. It was an escalating game of psychological warfare and nerves were beginning to fray. Even seasoned correspondents were starting to look for a way out. Meanwhile, the East Timorese were preparing for the worst. They knew their country was about to be taken apart, and they wanted the journalists to stay.

A media flood

The August 30 independence referendum had captured the attention of the world's media. In terms of international interest, key events in Timor were the invasion in 1975, the Santa Cruz massacre of 1991 and the Nobel Peace Prize for independence campaigner Jose Ramos Horta and Catholic Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo in 1996. And now here was the story of the year.

A small number of journalists had been in Timor for the months leading to the ballot, reporting on a widespread campaign of intimidation and fear by the militia to intimidate East Timorese against voting for independence.

But as the ballot got closer it became clear they had failed. East Timorese turned out in their thousands to vote despite the violence and threats. In Maliana, virtually deserted before the poll, the locals poured back in from the hills to vote.

By August 30 there were around 600 journalists crammed into Dili. CNN, Reuters TV, APTV and the European Broadcasting Union had all set up satellite dishes and were sending live television feeds around the world. They made the Hotel Mahkota their base, with its flat rooftop housing a sea of cables and communications hardware. The Mahkota was one of the newer buildings in the crumbling capital, right across the road from the port and had views across the city and into the hills.

Radio reporters had satellite phones to send sound bites to stations around the world. And newspapers had reporters and photographers with laptops and scanners sending back words and pictures.

Other hotels booked up by the media were the New Resende and the Turismo, where John the elderly waiter endearingly told all comers about serving Roger East his last meal in the dining room before he was killed in 1975 by the Indonesian army.

For Australian journalists there were the grim memories of East and the Balibo Five.

Partly in response to these killings the International Federation of Journalists had set up an office in Dili to aid journalists. Melbourne radio journalist Heather Patterson and Indonesian journalist Ezki Suyanto staffed the Safety Of Media in East Timor (SOMET) office. Journalists registered with SOMET on arrival and were given briefings and safety advice by Patterson and Suyanto.

Stirring the pot

In the days immediately after the vote it became increasingly clear something ugly was going to happen. Reports were coming in from around the province of militia violence, attacks on civilians, and increasingly, attacks on UN staff.

The most over-used word was "tense". It was uttered breathlessly in dozens of TV pieces to camera and littered a thousand radio reports.

UNAMET held daily media conferences at the Mahkota. Although there wasn't always a lot of information, it was an important gathering point to swap stories and discuss the day ahead.

The competition was to be in the right place at the right time to get footage or an eye-witness account of militia violence. As the media conference would end, scores of journalists would file out and whisper to each other where they thought trouble might be. Big organisations had hired local drivers and translators. The few freelancers had to scramble for transport as best they could.

Media cars would cruise Dili, following reports of gatherings of militia gangs. The media seemed to encourage the militia gangs to act up. They would burn cars and tyres and make faces for the cameras.

But we knew there was worse to come. It was a game of cat and mouse as anxious media crews followed militia members from place to place, waiting for something big to blow. As the days went on and the rumours about the election result raced around, journalists became more stressed. Something had to give.

Exit stage left

Then on Tuesday evening there was the major skirmish described above and the

general level of panic reached fever pitch. Fewer journalists were moving about, and most of the reporters in outlying regions had retreated to Dili. The road to the airport was blocked and all commercial flights were suspended. The road to West Timor was also cut by a militia roadblock.

On Thursday evening, after a series of worried phone calls back to headquarters, ITV became the first major media organisation to announce it was pulling out. On Friday morning they commissioned a charter plane, and did a deal with the TNI to give them safe passage to the airport. A Japanese crew were the first to go, lying on the floor of the open army trucks and covering their heads with their hands while triumphant TNI troops ordered them about. The scene was filmed by the remaining media. The British journalists were next, climbing aboard the trucks with the rest of us looking on.

Ironically, just hours after they left we got news the election result would be announced the next morning. ITN had just missed the biggest press conference of the referendum.

Results announced to a deserted city

On Saturday morning UNAMET chief Ian Martin told a hushed crowd of around 200 journalists that just under 80 per cent of East Timorese had voted for independence. Anxious Australian journalists warned those present not to show any emotion at the result, as there was still one Indonesian TV camera present. They surmised cheering would be seen as evidence of anti-Indonesian bias.

Dili was now a ghost town. All businesses were closed, the market was empty and the streets were deserted apart from militia and army trucks.

A few of us decided to drive around that afternoon and while we were out a lone militia man attacked the Mahkota with a machete, coming right into the foyer and smashing the glass. He was watched by at least 200 armed troops — who said they were unable to stop him. The man drove away on a motorbike and later came back with a few others and shot up the front of the hotel. The message was clear — get out now while you can. This act was enough to trigger the vast majority of the remaining journalists to leave.

By that afternoon, all major media organisations decided to evacuate. The decision was made partly because of fears for human lives, but also because of the amount of equipment that would have to be left behind if there was an emergency evacuation. There was tons of broadcast equipment worth millions of dollars and this was the last chance to get it out in one piece.

The biggest scene of organised destruction was happening in front of our noses and most of the media left while it was going on ... There appeared to be no rules. You couldn't trust the army or the police to defend you.

The hotel that night was bedlam. Rooms were emptied, there were bags everywhere, and boxes of gear were packed up. Journalists dashed about, packing up and making their farewells. Quite a few were drinking and the mood was one of relief. Most journalists argued it had just become too dangerous to move about, and their ability to gather news from the confines of the hotel was extremely limited. But despite a sense of outrage, most people wanted to go.

Don Greenlees, the Jakarta correspondent for *The Australian* newspaper told Irish television that night: "It is quite clear to me that something dreadful is going to happen. They're going to kill a lot of people and they want to do their killings in peace."

There were at least three charter flights booked for the next day, one organised by the EBU and one organised by AFP. It was a mass exodus.

A small group decided to stay, but Dili was getting increasingly spooky. Life telescoped into the moment, and planning anything was impossible.

Meanwhile, the army and militia were supervising the mass deportation of the Timorese. Four of us walked to the pier to see a stream of people being forced onto ships bound for the nearby island of Alore, as well as Flores and Kupang. As we watched, militia men surrounded us and waved guns and machetes in our faces, telling us to leave. They were filmed by English cameraman Max Stahl.

In terms of Australian media, the only people who were left were John Martinkus, filing for Australian Associated Press and Lindsay Murdoch, filing for Fairfax. I was now filing for *The Australian* and *The Irish Times*.

The biggest scene of organised state destruction was being carried out in front of our noses and most of the media left while it was going on.

For those of us who stayed, the situation was extremely uncertain. There appeared to be no real rules, apart from you couldn't trust the army or police to defend you. A small group of us made it as far as the Turismo on the waterfront,

where the soldiers told us we would be attacked. We spent that night hiding in our rooms as the city was burned and destroyed and gunfire echoed nearby. At one point snipers came close enough so we could hear the bullets whistling past. We were defenceless if attacked, but were counting on the fact we wouldn't be attacked because it would cause too much trouble if a group of Western journalists were shot down. It made a sort of sense, but we were pretty jumpy.

Why did we stay? Well, we felt we couldn't just walk out on the Timorese. In a cruel irony, UNAMET had told them: "we will stay to help make your choice a reality". After 25 years of being persecuted, killed and ripped off by the Indonesian army, they had been asked to vote for their futures. And now that they had, the media and the UN were walking away from them, leaving them to be deported, beaten and killed. I just couldn't walk away.

Interestingly, most of the people who stayed were freelance. There was suddenly a surfeit of work and our workload increased dramatically. At one point John Martinkus estimated he had filed around 10,000 words.

While there were a small group of us left, the loss of the satellite feeds meant any video footage would have to be carried out by hand. It was in all of our interests to keep the story alive, so as people left they were loaded up with digital video tapes and rolls of film. There were strict instructions not to film anything on the way to the airport.

UNAMET compound

We lasted one night at the Turismo, but by next morning the army arrived to try and clear us out. We refused to go, but by mid-morning a militia gang had turned up. A Timorese called Jacinto, who was translating for AAP, told us they were waved in by the very troops who were supposed to be guarding us.

"Go in and shoot them," the army told the militia. Fourteen of us ended up huddling in one room as shots were fired outside. Eventually we opened the door to find the army outside. They wanted us to go with them, but we refused. We negotiated a deal to be escorted to the UNAMET compound, where up to 1500 refugees were huddling together. It was to become the last place occupied by Westerners in Timor.

A premature evacuation

Over the next five days there were many strange scenes as the 25 journalists who were left struggled to do our jobs. Both landlines and mobile phones were

switched off and on as the city was burned around us and gangs drove past our compound. The days became a blur of crying refugees, the crack of gunfire, fielding telephone calls from around the world, and just watching helplessly as a city was destroyed.

It was incredibly frustrating not being allowed out. And of course, the people who were really suffering were the Timorese. Their homes were being destroyed, they were being terrorised and attacked, and families were separated as the forced evacuation of the territory gathered pace. In just one week the troubled province had been ransacked, looted, burnt and its people driven out. We watched and filed as often as the satellite phones would allow. The end couldn't be far away.

Irish RTE journalist Jerry O'Callaghan, summed up on his piece to camera: "From here, helpless, we watch as a city goes up in flames, and embark on a roller-coaster of emotions, lurching from crisis to crisis."

Forced to leave

On Wednesday evening, UNAMET chief Ian Martin held a media conference and announced all Western UN staff and media would all be evacuated the next day. Only current local Timorese were eligible, and the remaining refugees would be offered a safe passage across the mountains to Dare. Many of us felt it was a death sentence for the Timorese and while many UN staff and journalists accepted the decision a small group of us decided we would not leave until the refugees had been safely relocated.

All the journalists signed a petition saying we thought the evacuation was premature and should be delayed, and we tried to get a delegation in to see Martin.

A Dutch journalist told a security officer who blocked our path: "We are not here as reporters. We're just here as people who are our friends are being shot at." Her face was racked with emotion, fatigue and despair.

Meanwhile, there were scenes of pandemonium as the Timorese realised they were to be abandoned. Some just sat and cried, while others tried to escape out the back of the compound and up into the black hills and snipers. Finally, by 1am, the word went out — Martin had relented and the evacuation had been postponed for twenty four hours.

On Friday morning, most of the remaining journalists, along with UNAMET staff, were flown out by the Australian Army to Darwin. We were exhausted,

hungry, dirty, our nerves shot. But it was a terrible feeling to get on an Indonesian army truck knowing the army had won. A country had been destroyed and the international community had stood by and let it happen.

Six journalists stayed behind: **Marie Colvin**, a hardened war correspondent from the *Sunday Times* and two female Dutch journalists remained in the compound. Freelancer **Robert Carroll**, who was filing for newspapers in Macau, and freelance cameraman Max Stahl both fled into the hills towards Dare. American journalist and activist **Allan Nairn** also slipped away into the hills.

The Darwin circus

When we arrived in Darwin, we were met by a huge group of Australian and overseas media that were desperately trying to follow the story from the NT. It was strange to face the media scrum desperate for footage. There were too many journalists here and not enough news, and yet just one hour's flight away was the biggest scene of destruction happening virtually unrecorded.

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