

## Missing the boat: Indonesian *Kompas* newspaper's 1995 reporting on asylum seekers from East Timor

Vannessa Hearman<sup>72</sup>

### Introduction

A short animation film titled *Jose Nia Istorja (Jose's Story)*, based on the life of East Timorese actor and activist, Jose da Costa, depicted the voyage to Australia of a small fishing boat, the *Tasi Diak* (Good Sea), on which he was a passenger (Chandler and da Costa 2013). On 30 May 1995, da Costa was among 17 young East Timorese men and women and a six-month-old baby to reach Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory of Australia, in the *Tasi Diak*. This paper is part of a larger research project on the arrival of the *Tasi Diak* in Darwin, and the Indonesian and Australian government responses to the boat and its passengers. In this paper, I compare the amount and content of coverage in *Kompas*, Indonesia's highest selling newspaper regarding the *Tasi Diak*'s arrival with that of Australian dailies. I argue that its scant reporting of the boat can be explained by the influence of two factors. The first was a renewed crackdown on media outlets critical of the Suharto New Order government, an event which caused widespread concern among journalists and media corporations. The second was the evident desire of the Indonesian government, supported by a compliant press, to promote the view that conflict had decreased in East Timor and the population had, by and large, accepted integration into Indonesia. The *Tasi Diak*'s successful voyage to Australia and its passengers' request for asylum did not accord with the government's preferred image about East Timor at that time.

### The *Tasi Diak* passengers in Australia

After five nights at sea, the *Tasi Diak* was towed into Darwin's Larrakeyah naval base on 30 May. The young passengers alleged they had been mistreated and tortured by Indonesian security forces as a result of their opposition to Indonesian rule. Some had been involved in the November 1991 funeral march to the Santa Cruz cemetery that was subsequently attacked by the Indonesian army, in what became known as the Dili Massacre (A Paz é Possível em Timor Leste, 1993, 3).<sup>73</sup> While there was condemnation and some international pressure on the Indonesian government following the massacre, the armed forces also increased repression against East Timorese youth involved in the clandestine resistance movement (Fernandes 2011, 101).

The *Tasi Diak* was the only boat containing asylum seekers to have come to Australia from East Timor during Indonesian rule (1975 – 1999). Since 1992, the Labor government under Paul Keating had imposed a policy of mandatory detention of those arriving by boat illegally in Australia (Higgins 2017, 6). The 18 Timorese arrivals were to be no exception (Alcorn 1995, 3). Their lawyers argued that they should be detained in Darwin close to the East Timorese community, but they failed to gain a permanent injunction in the Federal Court on the asylum seekers' removal from Darwin (Wilcox and MacKinolty, 1995, 3). On 31 May 1995, at almost midnight, the Australian government flew the group to the Curtin Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base immigration detention centre near Derby, in Western Australia. On 20 July, the *Tasi Diak* passengers were released on bridging visas to allow them

<sup>72</sup> Vannessa Hearman is lecturer in Indonesian Studies at Charles Darwin University, Australia.

<sup>73</sup> In that massacre, the army opened fire and killed approximately 271 people on 12 November 1991. The protesters had taken part in a ritual march to the Santa Cruz cemetery, commemorating slain pro-independence youth, Sebastião Gomes.

to access specialised health care and counselling, a move that deeply angered the Indonesian government (*NT News* 1995, 6).

Following their release, members of the group lived with East Timorese families in Melbourne, Sydney and Darwin (*NT News* 1995, 6). As the visas restricted the holders from working or attending school in Australia, these host families, many of whom suffered their own financial difficulties, supported the new arrivals (Deakin 2017, 207). They lived under bridging visas for years, and like the case of 1600 other East Timorese asylum seekers, were at risk from deportation back to East Timor (Graydon, 1998, 24). When the East Timorese voted to reject Indonesian rule over the territory in August 1999 in a United Nations (UN) supervised referendum, these asylum seekers came under renewed pressure to return to their homeland. By September 1999, East Timor had reverted to UN administration in preparation for independence.

### ***Kompas* coverage on East Timor (June – August 1995)**

From the group's arrival in Australia on 30 May, the Indonesian government had tried to downplay the boat passengers' asylum claims that were based on them having been mistreated and tortured by the Indonesian military in East Timor. The Indonesian embassy in Canberra referred to the group as an 'aberration,' whose arrival, they alleged, was timed to undermine the start of the All Inclusive East Timor Dialogue (AIETD) (Willox and MacKinolty, 1995). The AIETD was a series of dialogues involving East Timorese representatives under the auspices of the UN Secretary General Boutros-Boutros Ghali. In researching the case of the *Tasi Diak*, I set out to examine how its departure from East Timor and the claims of its passengers had been reported in Australian and Indonesian newspapers. The focus of this paper is the extent of reporting of the boat voyage by *Kompas*, Indonesia's largest daily, published by the Catholic-owned Gramedia, with an estimated circulation of 415,000 in 1990 (CPJ 1991, ii). In my searches through *Kompas* newspaper, I focused on the period from 30 May to the end of August 1995, the critical dates in this case. Over the course of these searches, I also examine how this newspaper covered topics pertaining to East Timor in the same period.

Mid-1995 was a time of turmoil for many Indonesian news media outlets and journalists. Despite the New Order regime announcing in August 1990 an era of *keterbukaan* (openness), on 21 June 1994, the government suspended the publishing licences of three news weekly magazines, *DeTik*, *Tempo* and *Editor*. While each magazine was banned for a different reason, 'all [three] had reputations for hard-hitting, investigative reporting on controversial issues' (Romano 1996, 163). Widespread protests occurred against the press bans (Santoso, Utami and Hasyim 1994, 12-14). Angry over the bans and the lack of a response by the Indonesian Journalists' Association (Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia, PWI), 85 journalists established a new, independent journalists' association, Alliance of Independent Journalists (Aliansi Jurnalis Independen, AJI) in August 1994 (Romano 2002, 90). On 16 March 1995, three AJI members were arrested and subsequently tried for their involvement in publishing a newsletter that was critical of the government, called *Independen*, without a permit. A week earlier, on 9 March, the editor of another independent news outlet, *Kabar dari PIJAR* (News from PIJAR), Tri Agus Susanto Siswomihardjo was also arrested. PIJAR was a non-government organisation, established in 1989, which also condemned Indonesian brutality in East Timor.

Given the tightly controlled media environment and the sensitivity of the East Timor issue, news about the *Tasi Diak* was absent from the pages of *Kompas* until late July. From that time to the end of August 1995, only three news articles and one editorial on the *Tasi Diak* appeared. The first report was published on 25 July 1995, over two months since the boat departed from Dili (*Kompas*, 1995a, 11). It reported that members of the group were released from 'a special holding place', a *penampungan*. The article carried the headline, "Indonesia

regrets Australia's release of 18 illegal Timorese immigrants," with scant background information about them. It also erroneously stated that the 18 were permitted to stay permanently in Australia. The article quoted Indonesian officials, the Minister for Defence and Security, Edi Sudradjat, and Commander of the Armed Forces, Feisal Tanjung, who both 'regretted' Australia's decision and disputed the asylum seekers' claims of mistreatment by the military. Tanjung pointed out that their decision to leave East Timor was a clear indication that they did not 'love their people'. Theo Sambuaga, a politician from the ruling government party, Golkar (Golongan Karya, Functional Groups), argued that the Australian government's decision was 'unfair,' and had no legal standing. There was encouragement from others interviewed, such as nationalist youth leaders, for Indonesia to 'reconsider' its relationship with Australia.

The next *Kompas* report, dated 29 July 1995, carried the headline "Australia will not apologise to the Republic of Indonesia" (*Kompas* 1995b, 6). This headline was a distortion of a statement made by Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, reported in the Australian media, that the issuing of the bridging visas complied with Australian procedures of processing asylum claims. Evans declared that he 'made no apology for the application of [Australia's] refugee assessment procedures and principles' (*Canberra Times* 1995). He had not specified to whom this apology should be made, however, in the following sentence quoted by the Australian media, Evans indicated he would explain the application of these procedures to his Indonesian colleagues. The *Kompas* newspaper reported these statements as Evans being unwilling to apologise to Indonesia.

Besides reporting Evans' public statements, the same article also presented in three paragraphs information from 'Timorese sources' that discussed the *Tasi Diak*'s departure from East Timor. The newspaper reported that the boat, officially named the *Tasi Diak* 119, was allegedly stolen from its owner and operator, Jose Vicente and his son Agustino da Costa, and that it departed from the port of Hera for Australia on 23 May 1995. According to Jose Da Costa (pers comm, 2017), who had been one of the co-organisers of the voyage, the boat was rented from a man named Julio. The boat had departed from Hera for nearby Tibar on 24 May, in order to pick up its remaining passengers before departing the following day. Evidently, the Indonesian authorities possessed scant information about how the boat's escape to Australia had occurred.

The last two items that *Kompas* published in the period under consideration was an article and an editorial from August 1995. The editorial on 1 August stated that, despite the difficulties posed by the question of East Timor, the relationship between the two neighbouring countries was unique and would survive the *Tasi Diak* test (*Kompas* 1995c, 4). The article, dated 11 August, reported in the first half, that Evans had clarified that the 18 asylum seekers were only issued bridging visas while the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs continued to assess their claims (*Kompas* 1995d, 6).

In contrast to *Kompas*, Australian newspapers reported the case at a great rate. In the *Northern Territory (NT) News*, over a period of eight weeks (in comparison with 12 weeks with *Kompas*), there were 46 instances of East Timor being mentioned in the newspaper, including news articles, editorials, cartoons, and readers' letters. Of the 46, 13 dealt specifically with the *Tasi Diak*. In the *Age* newspaper published in Melbourne, the city to which most of the 18 asylum seekers headed, there were 29 East Timor-related items from late May to the end of August 1995. Fifteen of these related to the *Tasi Diak*. A keyword search of the *Canberra Times*' digital collections through the National Library of Australia's Trove search platform yielded 12 articles on the *Tasi Diak* from June to July 1995. A small number of the articles were syndicated in more than one newspaper in Australia. Nonetheless, the difference in the number of articles between *Kompas* and Australian newspapers is stark. The Indonesian newspaper was, however, not entirely silent on the question of East Timor. *Kompas* provided coverage on East Timor that portrayed the situation there as stable and

improving, despite evidence to the contrary. Table 1 shows the range of topics covered by *Kompas* in that period. Items included news articles, opinion pieces, editorials and other mentions.

Topic	Number of items
The first meeting of the All Inclusive East Timor Dialogue (AIETD) from 3-5 June 1995	7 items
The appointment of former army officer, Herman Mantiri as ambassador to Australia in June 1995.	6 items
The Liquiça incident (the shooting of six East Timorese by soldiers on 12 January 1995 and military tribunal proceedings against the soldiers)	5 items
Alleged phone tapping and espionage of the Indonesian Embassy in Canberra by Australia, based on <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> investigative reporting	3 items
Indonesian protests, including at the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, following the burning of Indonesian flags in late July during protests in major cities in Australia against joint military exercises.	3 items
Joint military exercises, Kangaroo '95, in northern Australia in early August, involving Australia, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, US, Singapore, Britain and Malaysia.	2 items
Development oriented coverage (East Timor's first woman doctor graduated and the construction of the Cristo Rei statue in Dili)	2 items

As a result of space constraints, only the first three of these topics will be discussed below. By far the most reported East Timor-related event in mid-1995 was the All Inclusive East Timor Dialogue (AIETD). Under Boutros-Boutros Ghali's auspices, between 1995 and 1998, East Timorese representatives from outside and inside East Timor, including Jose Ramos Horta, Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, and Indonesia's special ambassador, Francisco Lopes Da Cruz participated in four rounds of dialogue. The dialogues were, according to Ghali, 'to provide a venue for the East Timorese to explore ideas of a practical nature that might have a positive impact on the situation in East Timor and assist in the establishment of an atmosphere conducive for the achievement of a solution' (United Nations Commission on Human Rights 1996). The first of these took place from 3 to 5 June 1995 in Burg Schlaining, Austria. The AIETD occupied a prominent place in *Kompas* reporting in June, reflecting the government's view that the dialogues could lead to the question of East Timor being resolved in Indonesia's favour, for the territory to remain part of Indonesia. One article suggested that the 'anti-integrationists', such as Ramos-Horta, were only a small minority, and they had respected Indonesia's demand that the dialogues not discuss 'political issues' (*Kompas* 1995e, 6).

The desire to reflect Indonesia's serious regard for human rights in East Timor was shown by the *Kompas* newspaper giving prominent coverage to the military's handling of the 'Liquiça case'. The military set up a special tribunal to try two soldiers for the shooting of six alleged pro-independence supporters in the town of Liquiça (*Kompas* 1995f, 10). The two defendants were discharged from the military and sentenced to between four, and four and a half years', imprisonment. The newspaper, however, referred to the victims as belonging to the 'GPK'

(Gerombolan Pengacau Keamanan, gangs disturbing security), a pejorative term for the pro-independence forces (*Kompas* 1995g, 10).

Even prior to the release of the *Tasi Diak* 18 from detention, the relationship between Australia and Indonesia hit the front page of *Kompas* as a result of Indonesia's proposed appointment of former army commander of East Timor, Herman Mantiri, as ambassador to Australia. There was strong opposition from the Australian public to this proposed appointment. Following the Dili Massacre of 1991, Mantiri commanded the army's Udayana Division, which included East Timor, for seven months in the first half of 1992. He was quoted as saying that the behaviour of the army at the cemetery was quite proper (*Kompas* 1995h, 1). *Kompas* (1995i, 1) emphasised that senior members of the Labor government, namely Prime Minister Paul Keating and Foreign Minister Gareth Evans defended Indonesia's choice of ambassador. However, on 6 July 1995, Indonesia withdrew the nomination, and the post was left vacant for five months until December of that year. In July and August 1995, the bilateral relationship again came under a spotlight, as protesters held demonstrations at Indonesian consular offices in Australia over the occupation of East Timor, during which Indonesian flags were burnt. Despite these setbacks, the Indonesian government gave the overall impression that its diplomats were in control and behaved with dignity, and that it was only a matter of time for East Timor's campaign for independence to disappear. The *Kompas* newspaper reported comments by Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, who stated that more vigorous efforts by Indonesian diplomats in countering negative publicity about East Timor, or what he termed 'pro-active diplomacy,' were needed (*Kompas* 1995j, 1).

## Conclusion

The absence of reporting on the *Tasi Diak* in the pages of *Kompas*, Indonesia's largest circulation daily, suggests that newspaper ignored the case while the 18 asylum seekers were in detention and with the outcome of their asylum claims uncertain. It was no longer possible, however, to continue to do so, once the 18 were released. The case was then reported only in a piecemeal fashion, relying only on Indonesian government sources. These sources denigrated those on the boat as traitors to Indonesia and rejected their claims of abuse at the hands of the Indonesian military. In its reports, *Kompas* downplayed the importance of the arrival in Australia of the first and only boatload of asylum seekers from Indonesian occupied East Timor. Based on this preliminary research, I conclude that *Kompas* reporting portrayed Indonesian rule over East Timor as secure. The newspaper gave the impression that Indonesian diplomats were in control of the country's image overseas. Indonesia's political control over East Timor was slowly being accepted and recognized internationally, suggested the newspaper. The actions of *Kompas* must, however, be understood in the context of a media operating under the Indonesian government's restrictions. Nowhere were these restrictions more apparent than in the 1994 banning of three news weeklies critical of the government and the jailing of writers and journalists in 1995.

## Acknowledgements

This research was financially supported by the Northern Territory Department of Tourism and Culture's History Grant 2016. In the preparation of this paper, the author gratefully acknowledges Jose da Costa, the anonymous referees, and the organising committee of the Timor Leste Studies Association's 2017 conference.

## Bibliography

- A Paz é Possível em Timor Leste (ed) 1993, *East Timor after Santa Cruz: Indonesia and the International Order*, A Paz é Possível em Timor Leste, Lisbon.
- Alcorn, Gay 1995, 'Boat people beat detention - for a day', *The Age*, 31 May.
- Canberra Times 1995, 'Evans makes no apologies for Timorese visas', 29 July.

- Chandler, Wendy, and Da Costa, Jose 2013, *Jose Nia Istorja* (Jose's Story), Parasol Productions, Sydney, and Dili Film Works, Dili.
- Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) 1991, *Journalism in Suharto's Indonesia (with an update on the massacre in Dili, East Timor, November 12, 1991)*, Committee to Protect Journalists, New York.
- Da Costa, Jose 2017, Personal communication, 20 September.
- Deakin, Hilton 2017, with D'Orsa, Jim and Therese, *Bonded through Tragedy, United in Hope: The Catholic Church and East Timor's Struggle for Independence*, Grattan Publishing, Melbourne.
- Fernandes, Clinton 2011, *The Independence of East Timor: Multi-Dimensional Perspectives – Occupation, Resistance, and International Political Activism*, Sussex University Press, Eastbourne.
- Graydon, Carolyn 1998, 'East Timorese asylum seekers: close to home but no justice in sight', *Arena Magazine* 36: 24.
- Higgins, Claire 2017, *Asylum by Boat: Origins of Australia's Refugee Policy*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Kompas* 1995a, 'Menhankam: RI sesalkan Australia lepas 18 imigran gelap TimTim', 25 July.
- Kompas* 1995b, 'Australia tidak akan mohon maaf pada RI', 29 July.
- Kompas* 1995c, 'Sebagai negara bertetangga, hubungan RI – Australia unik', 1 August.
- Kompas* 1995d, 'Australia belum terima alasan imigran Timtim', 11 August.
- Kompas* 1995e, 'Menlu Alat: Hasil AETD masih terus dipelajari', 12 June.
- Kompas* 1995f, 'Sidang perkara Liquisa terbuka bagi pers asing', 2 June.
- Kompas* 1995g, 'Sidang Liquisa: Korban yang ditembak adalah GPK', 7 June.
- Kompas* 1995h, 'Mantiri batal jadi dubes di Australia', 7 July.
- Kompas* 1995i, 'PM Keating mendukung HBL Mantiri', 30 June.
- Kompas* 1995j, 'Alat: Diplomat RI harus lebih proaktif', 22 August.
- NT News* 1995, 'E Timor refugees win bid for freedom', 21 July.
- Romano, Angela 2002, *Politics and the press in Indonesia: Understanding an evolving political culture*. Curzon, Richmond.
- Romano, Angela 1996, 'The open wound: Keterbukaan and press freedom in Indonesia', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 50(2): 157-169.
- Santoso, Utami, Ayu, and Hasyim, Toni 1994, 'SIUPP dibatalkan, SIUPP diharapkan', *Forum Keadilan* 3(7).
- United Nations Commission on Human Rights 1996, 'Report of the Secretary General, Situation in East Timor', E/CN.4/1996/56, 29 February. Commission on Human Rights, Fifty-second session, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/commission/country52/56-timor.htm>
- Willox, Innes, and MacKinolty, Chips 1995, 'Boat people lose court fight to stay in Darwin', *The Age*, 1 June.