

The Suai Church Massacre

836. One of the worst massacres of this period occurred at Our Mother of Rosário Church (*Nossa Senhora do Rosario*) on 6 September in Suai. The massacre was a premeditated act of mass killing against an unarmed civilian population. It was also a coordinated operation of TNI and Laksaur militia members involving TNI premises such as the sub-district military command post in Salele (Tilomar, Covalima) and the district military command post in Suai.

837. Our Mother of Rosário Church had been a place where the civilian population from all sub-districts in Covalima sought refuge from January to September 1999, as members of the Laksaur and Mahidi militias and the TNI terrorised those perceived to be independence supporters.¹⁰¹⁸ During the Popular Consultation the church became the focus of expressions of hostility by pro-autonomy supporters in the area. After the announcement of the result of the ballot, TNI and militia members intensified their threats by firing their guns into the air in the vicinity of the church. On 5 September Father Dewanto asked the district police commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Gatot Subyaktoro, to provide security for the people sheltering in the church compound, as the militia began a campaign of violence in Suai Town. The Commission received reports suggesting that on 4 and 5 September, at least five people were killed and subsequently the flow of refugees to the church grounds swelled.¹⁰¹⁹ The commander assured the priest he would arrange security for them. On the same day Father Hilario Madeira advised the people in the church compound to seek refuge elsewhere, on the grounds that the church was no longer safe for them. About 500 people left the church compound and went into hiding in the nearby forests.

838. In the morning of 6 September the Laksaur militia group under the command of M78 and M59 gathered at the Koramil in Salele, which was also the militia headquarters. Following the arrival of a truck full of TNI soldiers, M78 told his men that they would attack the church that day. The militia group under M78 and M59 went to the Kodim in Suai and then to the house of the district administrator, Colonel M133 [East Timorese]. In the afternoon, at about 2.30pm, the militia group left the house for the church. M133 followed them from behind, dressed in a TNI uniform and armed with a rifle.

839. On arrival, the militia and TNI members surrounded the church. The attack began with the throwing of two grenades into the church compound and was followed by shooting. They entered the church compound and attacked the people sheltering there. They killed many civilians including three priests, Father Hilario Madeira, Father Tarsisius Dewanto and Father Francisco Soares.¹⁰²⁰ Between 27 and 200 people were killed during the attack and another 30 in targeted killings that followed. The Commission received numerous accounts of executions during the attack, including several accounts of rape and the execution of women and children.[†] A witness told the Commission that

^{*} The exact death toll in the attack is not known. The OHCHR Study puts it at at least 40. The Indonesian Commission on Human Rights Violations in East Timor (KPP-HAM) estimates that 50 were killed, while Yayasan HAK places the figure between 50 and 200. Approximately 27 bodies were recovered from mass graves in West Timor on or about 22 November 1999 under the direction of KPP-HAM [see Deputy General Prosecutor for Serious Crimes, Indictment against Herman Sedyono, et al., paragraph 311].

[†] M167 and M168 shot dead ten civilians, including a woman named Matilde who was seven months pregnant, which resulted also in the loss of her baby [HRVD Statement 3624]. Others shot dead included Eufraja Gusmão Amaral, the daughter of Mário Gusmão [HRVD Statement 7390], Paulus Seran (HRVD Statement 3638), and Patricio Mau and Carlos Yosep [HRVD Statement 8577]. Miguel da Cruz de Conceição gave testimony that Benyamin and Alito from Zumalai, two of eight friends killed during the attack, were beheaded [HRVD Statement 6351]. A woman who was raped at the church subsequently died as a result [HRVD Statement 8459]; another woman who was shot survived [HRVD Statement 3637].

militia members decapitated two persons, Benyamin and Carlito from Zumalai.¹⁰²¹ Another witness told the Commission that Jacinta Gusmão's neck was slashed with a sword.¹⁰²² Father Francisco Soares was also reportedly slashed in the neck and the stomach.¹⁰²³

840. Colonel M133, Lieutenant M134 [Indonesian], M78, M59, M135 and M136 [all East Timorese] were present and participated in the attack. A woman who had sought refuge at the church testified about the close coordination between the civilian authorities and militia in the attack:

In March 1999 my whole family left our house. We hired a minibus to take us to the Suai Church because a district military command soldier, Private Second Class Afonso Mau, often spied on our house.

[W]e remained at the church until August.

After the ballot, we came back to the church. On 6 September, the church was attacked by militia. My husband had run away to the forest the day before that. I was in Father Hilario's dining room, with my mother-in-law and sister-in-law. There was shooting from 2.00 to 3.00pm. Then the district administrator, M133, and the village head [of Foholulik Village, Tilomar Sub-district], M78, came and said, "Just kill all the men, spare the women," in front of us all.¹⁰²⁴

Feliciano Cardoso, witness to the Suai Church Massacre¹⁰²⁵

After my family participated in the referendum on 30 August 1999, we immediately sought refuge in the church. At that time, Suai was controlled by a joint group, namely the Laksaur and Mahidi militia [Live or Die for Integration with Indonesia], TNI and the Lorosae Police Contingent. Late on the afternoon of 6 September, the joint militia began shooting. Their attack on people gathered in the senior high school killed many people. They then headed for the church. All the windows were smashed and the door broken down. They invaded and ordered all the people inside to go out and surrender. Some of us, including myself and my three children, remained in the church. Others went outside, including my husband. The militia began to shoot those who went outside the church. I don't know how, but my husband managed to get away and run back into Father Hilario's room, which was located at the back of the church. Others were wiped out by the Laksaur/Mahidi team...

When the militia began to burn the church, we ran to the priests' house that was beside the church. That was when I could no longer see my husband. I saw Father Francisco holding up both hands and saying to the militia, "Enough. Don't shoot anymore. All of us are Timorese. Stop." The Father screamed when he saw how many victims had fallen. However the militia paid no attention to his screams. Then a militia, M137, who came from Raimea Village in Covalima, approached Father Francisco. He pretended to hug the priest, then escorted him down to the grotto of the Virgin Mary. When they came back, M137 shot the priest. But Father Francisco was not yet dead, so M137 took a sword and stabbed Father Francisco in the chest. That is when he died.

I saw my husband run from the priests' room when he heard the shooting. He was very emotional seeing that the priest had been shot. There was a group of militia outside the church, [including] M138 and M139 who were carrying weapons—AR-16, SKS and a sword. They began to shoot in the direction of my husband, but their weapons didn't fire. One of the militia asked my husband, "Why don't you run?" My husband answered, "I am a man. Let me be shot on my own land! Viva Xanana Gusmão! Viva Timor-Leste!" Then M139 took his sword and stabbed my husband in the left hip, and the sword came out on the right. He also slashed his left shoulder, his left foot and his right hand twice each. At about 4.00pm, my husband drew his last breath.

[T]hose of us who survived were ordered out [of the church]. We were shoved, kicked with boots, trodden upon and beaten. They pointed guns and machetes at us all the way from the church to the Kodim 1635 building...There were many people at the Kodim, among them Domingas, the wife of the [CNRT] zone leader of the sub-district of Zumalai [Covalima], with her daughters, Zulmira, Fatima, Agustinha, Cinta and Monica...While at the Kodim we were verbally abused, ridiculed and given leftover food. The other women and I did not eat because we were afraid of being poisoned. On 13 September 1999...the Kasdim [Kodim chief of staff] ordered our move to Betun [West Timor] on four trucks...but at the Camenasa [Suai, Covalima] crossroads we were left by the side of the road.

On 14 September 1999, at approximately 7.00pm, an East Timorese Laksaur member, M169, took away a girl who was with me at the time. She was forced into a hardtop jeep and taken away. On the same evening at 7.30pm, a friend and I also continued with the help of a Mahidi member we knew...He took us by foot to Betun. We were escorted by two police officers on motorcycles. Walking from the Camenasa crossroads to Betun, West Timor, took eight hours. We arrived on 15 September 1999 at 10.00am. [Just as we arrived] the girl was brought back by Laksaur member M169 on a motorcycle. When she got off the motorcycle she could not walk because she had been raped. She arrived with injuries and blood on her genitals, I treated her...she drank [a concoction of] water and betel leaf [sirih], I washed her with sirih water and leaves that I had boiled.

We were ordered to report at the Betun Military Command. We lived for two months at the Betun police station. While there we never felt safe because of the terrorising by the militia all day long. Our desire to return home became stronger when we heard that some refugees had returned to Suai. Quietly we ran off and returned to Suai on 11 November 1999.