In 1999, after almost 25 years of Indonesian occupation, the people of East Timor were given the chance to vote on whether or not to accept special autonomy as a province within the Indonesian Republic.

The election was preceded by widespread violence as pro-Indonesian militia sought out suspected independence supporters, and the rampage that followed the overwhelming vote for independence shocked the world. Militia and Indonesian troops embarked on a campaign of destruction, killing hundreds of East Timorese, and driving half the population – about 400,000 people – from their homes. United Nations (UN) personnel in the territory to oversee the election were physically threatened.

The international community demanded urgent action. Indonesia bowed to growing pressure and on 12 September 1999 agreed to the deployment of a peacekeeping force under Australian leadership. International Force East Timor (INTERFET), commanded by the Australian Major General Peter Cosgrove, was mandated to restore peace and security, support the UN personnel already there and facilitate humanitarian assistance operations. About 5500 of the 10,000-strong INTERFET were Australian military personnel, but twenty-two countries participated in the operation.

INTERFET began deploying on 20 September 1999, confronting horrific scenes of destruction across the capital, Dili. Smoke rose from burning buildings, and there were bodies in the streets.

The last Indonesian troops left East Timor at the end of October 1999, and INTERFET was disbanded in February 2000, having fulfilled its purpose. The UN took over peacekeeping efforts in East Timor, which achieved independence in May 2002.

IMAGE: As smoke billows from burning buildings, Australian soldiers patrol the streets of Dili in September 1999 as part of INTERFET. (AWM P04315.055; photographer Stephen Dupont)