

As the UN prepared to flee East Timor, one woman refused to go. Her courage saved 1,500 lives



REIGN OF TERROR: Marie Colvin, above, whose reports shamed the UN and helped save the lives of 1,500 refugees. Left, terrified Timorese flee the militia by seeking refuge within the UN compound in the capital, Dili

AMID the slaughter and butchery of East Timor, the tenacity of one woman — and her satellite telephone — helped to save 1,500 lives and possibly the reputation of the United Nations itself. Marie Colvin, 43, a roving foreign correspondent, chose to stay in the besieged UN compound in Dili on Friday, September 10, along with 80 UN personnel and 1,500 terrified

BY JAMES FOX

refugees. It is to Colvin that the refugees, and so many more in East Timor, owe their lives. Outside the walls a crazed and enraged militia, overseen by the Indonesian army, was battering the compound, letting off bullets and grenades in an attempt to intimidate the UN into evacuating. They wanted the UN out because they wanted no further

witnesses to their policy of terror in East Timor — a policy designed to destroy the process of independence for which the Timorese had voted overwhelmingly.

Colvin reported that on September 15, the UN had ordered all its personnel to be evacuated from the compound, leaving the refugees to face the horror outside.

“Was the UN really going to leave all these people behind?” wrote Colvin in her dispatch that Saturday. “Privately, Kelly (Brian Kelly, UN information officer) confirmed that it *was* but we were not to report this.”

Violence against the compound had been steadily increasing. Most British journalists use mobile phones but the government had turned off the phone network and the UN refused the journalists the use of its land lines. Colvin possessed the only satellite phone, unblockable by the local authorities.

Despite this link to the outside world, she, the UN and the refugees, were in mortal danger. After a grenade attack, Ian Martin, the chief of the UN mission, decided to evacuate all UN staff and 500 locals who had worked for the UN, leaving behind the 1,500 refugees.

There was pandemonium in the compound as the refugees watched the military packing their kit. Some tried to escape, only to be met by gunfire outside. One said to Colvin: “I have come back to die with my family.”

In desperation, Colvin went to Ian Martin. She told him that if he abandoned the refugees she would report it worldwide. “I told him it was morally indefensible and that they would all be slaughtered.

“The UN,” says Colvin, “had become a symbol of the vote going against Indonesia’s government and every bit of rage would have been vented against these people.”

Colvin began reporting, telling the world what was happening in this forgotten corner of East Timor. Geoffrey Robinson, the political officer for UNAMET (United Nations Mission For East Timor), later told journalists in Darwin, Australia, that if Colvin had not been there, he would have driven out of the gates, to his death.

The UN personnel were now divided — most of the military

wanted to leave; the political staff wanted to stay — “a virtual mutiny,” said Colvin. Ian Martin cabled New York with this news and, at 1.30am on Thursday, the evacuation was postponed for 24 hours.

On Friday, after negotiations with the Indonesians, the UN ordered that 80 of its staff would stay and 500 local personnel would leave. The government blocked the departure of the 1,500 refugees.

COLVIN was now broadcasting to CNN, the BBC, Sky, German, Australian and Irish television, furiously relating the events in and around the compound. Eventually, her words made an impact. On Saturday, a UN delegation, with attendant press corps, came to the compound to investigate and to talk to Colvin.

While negotiations were under way on Sunday for a peace-keeping force, she and most of the remaining UN officials declared that despite dwindling supplies and constant terror, they would not leave without the refugees.

The gamble worked. On Sunday night it was announced that they

were *all* to be evacuated. The joy was immediate.

“Many women half my size came up to hug me and my clothes were wet with tears,” said Colvin. “They knew the UN would have evacuated without them.”

At dawn on Monday, they were all flown to Darwin. Colvin’s broadcasts had been a deciding factor in the UN’s about-turn. She had the hardest evidence of what journalists before her could never quite prove — collusion between the army and the militias. The Indonesians were forced to buckle to a peace-keeping force.

Also, as Colvin says, “The UN people would not have stayed if there hadn’t been a journalist in the compound broadcasting and embarrassing the UN in New York. Neither the UN nor the people in Jakarta realised until very late the leverage that these refugees might have.”

Despite her ordeal, the only bruises Colvin suffered were on her back, from the hands of an 80-year-old woman refugee, who had never been in a car, let alone an aeroplane, when she boarded the flight to Darwin.

In her terror at being airborne, she clung for two hours with tenacious ferocity to her saviour.

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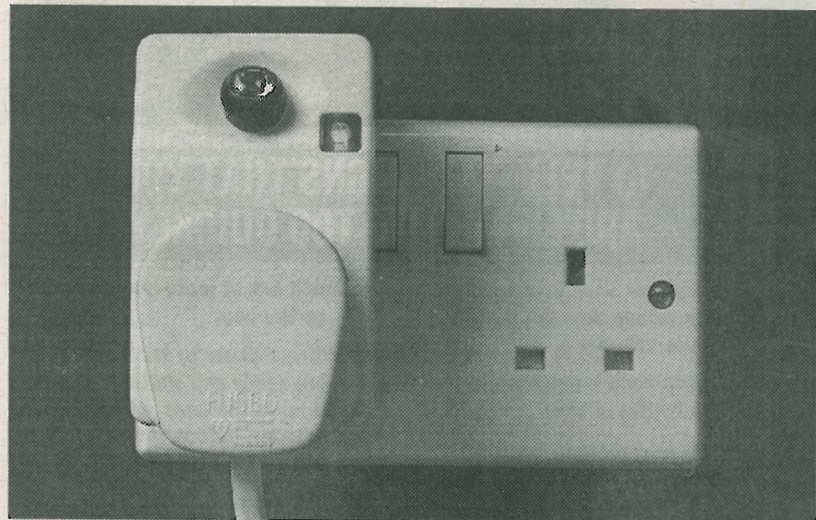
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pieces:

FACSIMILE COVER PAGE

To : Rosie Boycott
Sent : 10/13/99 at 6:42:34 PM
Subject : Marie etc

From : James Fox
Pages : 1 (including Cover)

Dear Rosie,

Very nice spread on Marie today, marred only by a really heavy blunder by one of your subs, in the sentence they constructed: 'Geoffrey Robinson..political officer of UNAMET...later told journalists in Darwin that if Colvin had not been there, he would have driven out of the gates, to his death.' Unbelievable, since the whole point of the piece is that the UN go Scot free leaving behind the REFUGEES to their death. Your readers might be quite puzzled, since it threatens to make nonsense of the piece. Robinson said, as I reported, that if Colvin hadn't been there the UN would have driven out of the gates, leaving the refugees behind. Oh well. Anyway I'm very glad you ran it nonetheless. Lots of love James