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Fears East Timor tensions will escalate

Reporter: Peter Cave

TONY JONES: Following almost a week of unrest in East Timor, there are now new warnings that violence could flare again with reports that 100 rebel soldiers have holed up in the mountains and are refusing to heed the Prime Minister's call to surrender. East Timor's national police chief says it's impossible to confirm or deny reports that between 10 and 20 people died in the violence in and around the capital over the weekend after a demonstration by a group of dismissed soldiers. In a moment we'll talk to East Timor's Foreign Minister, Jose Ramos Horta, who met his Australian counterpart Alexander Downer today. He asked for Australia's help to extend the UN's mission in the fledgling country, which is due to end next month. First, this report from foreign affairs editor Peter Cave in Dili.

PETER CAVE: East Timor's Foreign Minister, Jose Ramos Horta, who flew to Australia this week, says reports of the violence in his country are exaggerated.

JOSE RAMOS HORTA, EAST TIMOR FOREIGN MINISTER: So I can assure Australians, Timor is very safe.

PETER CAVE: Despite government assurances that security has been restored, up to 15,000 people are still living as refugees in camps like this one set up in a church grounds in Dili. Father Adriano from the Dom Bosco Seminary in Dili says 10,000 people sought shelter there over the weekend and that 1,500 families are still living there, too afraid to go home.

FATHER ADRIANO, DOM BOSCO SEMINARY: Most of the people that come here they are insecure in their house.

PETER CAVE: It still remains unclear how many people died but the ABC has confirmed that six bodies were brought to the national hospital. Four of them are awaiting autopsy in this refrigerated container. Still more are said to be in the hills around Dili where many of the rioters fled. Police are investigating a report that a man and his two sons were shot dead by troops as they tried to escape there and that two women relatives were also shot dead trying to recover the bodies. The national police chief says it's still impossible to say how many died.

PAULO MARTINS, EAST TIMOR POLICE CHIEF: I have to wait for the report from my officers, still investigating this because in many places, Tasi Tolo and the mountains. We will see how they report will deliver to me.

PETER CAVE: Among the scores of people injured, is the deputy police chief of Baucau who has been flown to Darwin for emergency surgery after being critically injured in the clash outside the Palace of Government on Friday. Paolo Martins says the violence could flare again.

PAOLO MARTINS: They have to understand that security is the responsibility of police. Not everybody can come outside with their katana and their bomb molotov.

PETER CAVE: The Government remains divided on how to deal with almost one-third of its armed forces sacked for going on strike over ethnic discrimination and many hundreds, some of them armed, remain fugitives and potential insurgents. A former spokesman for the rebel soldiers, former lieutenant Gastao Salsinha, told the ABC by phone he was now at a secret location in the mountains with 100 men and had no intention of heeding Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri's call that they surrender. He said he only trusted President Xanana Gusmao. He said his men had no guns only knives, but were prepared to stay in the mountains and fight on. Peter Cave, ABC News, Dili.

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