

[This piece was written during my time as a voluntary humanitarian aid worker in East Timor, and published in *The New Matilda*, an on-line social commentary publication. I plan to re-visit soon to see how the winds are blowing now the media spotlight has gone off the country.]

Waiting for the Sun: East Timor

Most of us know the country as East Timor, but the people who live here often refer to it, perhaps rather optimistically, as Timor Loros'ae – “The place where the sun rises”. It’s a term that’s gained a lot of currency since the 1999 referendum and the bloody events that followed the pro-Independence vote: in the songs that are an integral part of the new nation’s culture, in contemporary poetry and art, in the speeches of politicians.

Optimism is a much-needed commodity here, in a nation that has been authoritatively described as one of the poorest in the world. That description fits well with a number of critical indices of national well-being: a per capita share of GDP of around a dollar a day; an infant mortality rate of over 5 per cent (Australia’s equivalent is less than .05 per cent); and an average life expectancy of 57 years, around that of our own Indigenous population.

Then there’s the destruction. Even for someone like me, who’d done enough research to build up some kind of picture of what had happened following the referendum, the extent of the devastation here came as a huge shock. In an act of blatant spite the pro-integration militia, with the tacit approval of the Indonesian military, went on a rampage that left thousands of civilians and independence supporters dead, the national infrastructure largely destroyed and more than three quarters of the country’s buildings burned-out shells.

Even now, after years of reconstruction, at least half the premises here remain roofless, rusting hulks. There are no streetlights, little reticulated water or sewerage and - on an almost daily basis - no electricity. And it isn’t just Dili that suffered. Everywhere you travel in the country, the physical evidence of the milisis’ vengeance confronts you: in the weed-infested ruins of houses, churches and schools, in the rusted wrecks of vehicles, in the lack of even the simplest amenities.

The human cost of all this hasn’t been definitively calculated, and it’s unlikely that it ever will be. Common estimates put the death toll somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000; not just from the militias’ malevolence, but also from the widespread displacement of people, particularly in rural areas, that robbed entire regions of their livelihood throughout the relentless years of Indonesian occupation and Falintil resistance.

What is almost as chilling in this grim scenario, however, is the apparent ineffectiveness of the international relief effort in bringing substantial rejuvenation to this tiny nation. While every second vehicle on the road seems to be an aid agency Land Cruiser or equivalent, the roads themselves remain in a pitiful state; while there are innumerable malae (foreigners) in evidence, their concentration is in ‘high-level’ meetings or in the up-market hotels and restaurants rather than on the streets or among

the broader populace; and while there is an unquestionable current of foreign aid flowing into the country, one cannot help but wonder how much of it is being absorbed into the comparatively exorbitant salaries, lavish furnishings and state-of-the-art security systems of the numerous foreign consulates and embassies that infest the capital. So apparent is the disparity that some commentators, including a growing number of East Timorese, are beginning to refer to the aid-related presence here as 'the fourth occupation.'

Yet for all there is to be cynical about, there's an undeniable optimism among most of the people here that may, at the end of the day, be their saving grace. Despite the disillusionment and personal trauma - and it's hard to find anyone here who hasn't lost a relative or friend in the troubles - there's still a general attitude of goodwill towards foreigners, and to Australians in particular. Indeed, to receive such generosity and hospitality from those who - by our standards, at least - have so little, is a humbling experience. There is a deep spiritual strength here, in the truest sense of the word, and that determination may ultimately go a long way towards building the kind of enlightened, democratic and prosperous future the people seek.

But like most such moral capital, this goodwill may have limited currency; for ironically, the very things to which the East Timorese aspire - modernisation, a higher standard of living, material prosperity - are already producing the kind of undesirable side-effects that we see in our own culture, unbridled by any kind of education or control. There is already rampant pollution, particularly by plastics and the other flotsam of a consumer society. If the talk of tourism as a possible revenue stream is ever going to become a reality here, something radical is going to have to be done to curb the rapidly escalating garbage.

Then there's the demographic problem, creating a further source of social pressure. With a population growth rate of over 5 per cent, and almost half the population under the age of 14 years, the mere logistics of feeding and caring for people in a country that clings to a fairly conservative Catholic view of birth control and family planning are increasingly untenable. Related to this, and perhaps most pressing of all as a social issue, is the simmering discontent among the huge population of unemployed urban poor, and specifically among the young. East Timor is a nation born out of violence, and sometimes - among the crowds of youth on the streets at night, in the bullish attitude of some members of the military and police - I have detected a hint of darkness in the national psyche that could, if intended, spill into the kind of riots that shook Dili in 2002, or something worse.

The real test of national resilience will come when the UN finally brings the curtain down on its involvement here, taking a lot of the funds and aid-based NGOs with it. The fact is that, despite the rhetoric of our politicians, the overall investment and aid effort here has been woefully inadequate, much of it spent on maintaining the opulence of ex-pats' lifestyles or tied by procurement to overpriced Australian goods and services. In a strange exercise in doublethink, we seem to have overlooked our moral accountability, both in regard to our silent sanction of the Indonesian invasion of 1975 and in our inexplicable delay in intervening in 1999 until after Dili and most of the rest of the country had gone up in smoke.

It isn't popular to raise such concerns here, however. Foreign aid may not be a perfect arrangement, but the fact is there's precious little to replace it, and those who hold the

purse strings have considerable clout. The withdrawal of AusAID funds from organisations such as *Forum Tau Matan* and several other East Timorese NGOs that spoke out against the Australian Government's approach to the Timor Gap issue, makes a mockery of any claims to an 'arm's-length' funding policy.

In the short term, relief for East Timor may come in the form of petro-dollars, either from the Greater Sunrise field of the Timor Gap or from the other sources that the East Timorese Government, with the help of others such as the Chinese, has been now exploring. But even with the kind of 50-50 deal that East Timor has managed to claw back from foreign governments like ours, it may well be a case of too little, too late, with oil and gas revenues expected to be in sharp decline within the next decade. Also, there's no guarantee that the East Timorese Government, for all its high aspirations, will escape the virus of corruption that some say has already infected the halls of state, public office and the civil service.

Whichever way it goes, there can be no doubt that the road ahead is going to be a rough one for this tiny nation, and if the sun is indeed to rise on a brighter future, it will be from behind the towering storm clouds that rise each evening over Dili, and not from the flat ocean horizon beyond.

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