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## East Timor – Year Zero.

by Ross White, Bunelton WA

We landed at Dili about 7 AM local time and then took a taxi to Dili Palms Hotel. Chuckie had described the Dili Palms Hotel as 'idyllic' in her email. It was a joke! Our quarters were shipping containers – new, white painted, clean, air conditioned (luckily!). Each contained one director's chair, a cupboard and a double bunk; all quite adequate and comfortable. There should be no cause for complaint and there was not.

Now what does one say about Dili?

The whole population seems to line the roads, sitting on kerbs, or wandering aimlessly in small groups. As an obvious foreigner, therefore by definition affluent, I suddenly felt self consciously inadequate as Stuart and I walked past. I was uncomfortably uncertain about looking directly into the eyes of individuals comprising these groups of people I could neither speak to, nor help. I was unsure whether I should just pass by about my business as I would in my own environment; constantly grinning and saying "hullo" to person after person seemed facile. There were smiles enough to be acknowledged and 'bom dia' (good morning) was frequently called in a friendly fashion, but there were sufficient blank stares to jolt.

The general infrastructure, footpaths, drains etc. show decades of what one presumes to be bureaucratic neglect and that compounds the overall sense of the observers despair by the systematic destruction of buildings that occurred after the referendum, exactly one year ago. It is not a sudden shock that greets on arrival, because as one leaves the airport to drive into town, the shacks that line the road are half hidden by banana palms and shrubbery. Some of the shacks look a bit beaten up, but that seems more a product of poverty and neglect than of malicious damage. It is only after the attention learns to focus that the eyes identify the truth that buildings behind the palms are not just abandoned, but have been destroyed and burnt; not randomly, but systematically and with cold malice, murderously.

I try to imagine the circumstance of our Oz society suffering a similar degree of atrocity and the mechanics of our individual or collective response – how would we, I wonder, as a comfortably affluent and insular population, set about grasping our bootstraps to lift ourselves up?

The traditional owners in Oz have been known to say that the whitefellow with the best will in the world, for the most compassionate reasons and solicitous intentions will remain unable to *understand*. They are right of course and that is an added uncertainty I carry with me from this scene. In its broadest sense that's what saying sorry is supposed to be all about I would think. Sorry is to be seen to be trying to understand, and understanding is also what has to be seen to be attempted here.

Last night we walked to a restaurant just down the road from the hotel, Chinese of course – they are the ultimate entrepreneurs. It is a tasteful, adequate and functional building, roofed but open walled, undoubtedly a repaired or rebuilt site. The meal was superb. The maitre d' (who we thought was the proprietor, but was not) was a true pro (Chinese also) and spoke many languages and dialects (our Kelvin who has the same facility makes it his business to find out these things). He seemed to run the show for the Chinese family behind the counter who did not speak English. Our own 'Chuckie' (Wong Chia Lee) and Kelvin Lee – no relation – are both Chinese, Singaporean Chinese. They also have that entrepreneurial trait combined with the language skills that never fail to impress. They have focused their talents not only towards



business skills, but also towards social goals. When meeting people for the first time I guess we all wish to find instant rapport, I confess I simultaneously cast a benign glance in search of normal human failings. But I have to say that with these two people I found a rare pair and was humbled in the face of two wonderful humans. I felt privileged to know them. How's that for a confession?

Sharing our table was Carlos, a Brazilian working with World Vision, dedicated, serious, compassionate and practical, also David, an Indonesian (keeping a low profile!) who is commodities manager for World Vision. They were lovely table companions. (God, I hate being deaf!)

Today, Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> September I stayed at the hotel while my companions went to a church service at the Kenyan Army UN compound. Both Chuckie – who I believe, is a finger snapping Christian in her spare time – and Kelvin are motivated by a Christian social ethic. Carson and Stuart went along for the ride and enjoyed the experience. Perhaps I should have embraced some faith for the moment and gone after all, apparently there was a veritable UN melting pot present.

Then we all went into Dili for lunch at a bustling restaurant (Chinese!) frequented by UN soldiers, policemen and a varied crowd of cosmopolitan civilians. Amongst those relaxing at the tables were also many Australian soldiers, both men and women, all bristling in a casual sort of way with automatic weaponry. Then, after lunch, we visited Mr Caetano Guterrez's house and were shown the rebuilding project his co-operative committee has set itself to accomplish. The site adjoins Caetano's house and it used to be the teachers' training college.

Imagine if you will, that a complex roughly equivalent to our own Modern School was torched and except for the walls left standing had otherwise been totally destroyed. Picture then a group of volunteers, without resources or expertise and little money, but with heaps of determination, setting about re-roofing parts of it using timber cut direct from the forest. Their intention is to use the building as a vocational centre to train young people in manual skills in order to equip them with the ability to repair their own homes and those of friends and neighbours.

"It is year zero for East Timor," Caetano said with humility. Pol Pot you will recall used the same phrase, but I doubt it was used so humbly, or graciously, or with the same intent.

As we travelled the road to his house I was stricken to tears by the gaping roofless houses, the staring empty window spaces, all with their telltale eyebrows of black smoke stains, row after row of ruins. They had been white painted substantial cement block homes – leafy suburbia in the tropics – reduced to burnt out shells. Here and there were freshly painted dwellings, repaired during the year since the atrocity occurred. Caetano's was one of these, the fresh newness of the rebuilt section contrasting with the blackened portion not yet renovated. It was no random crime against humanity this – vicious, malignant planning had preceded this horror.

Caetano and Mrs Guterrez have a 26 year old son who is paraplegic. As a baby, he suffered a fever while Caetano was in the hills with the resistance movement when the Indonesians invaded. Mrs Guterrez was unable to get medical help for the child and he apparently sustained the paraplegia as a result. It was Kelvin, dear Kelvin, who during our visit sought him out to speak to him in his room and apparently speaking Tetun fluently enough, was able to carry a conversation with this lovely looking young man. Once again I felt this wave of inadequacy as I stood about (like the rest of us I guess), grinning inanely at our inability to converse.



Caetano's English was slow but understandable, his organisation (HOTFLIMA) was one formed during the time he and his comrades were imprisoned by the Indonesians and was created as a committee, pledged to an understanding that those who survived their imprisonment would look after the families of those who did not. That promise had seen Caetano's family grow to a number I was not able to work out. I understood he and his wife have four children of their own and an indeterminate number they call orphans – in their terms, having no father. There is an air of self-effacing dedication about the man. Once again too, there seems to be that sustaining religious faith - Catholic in his case I think.

We then went on to visit a man called Pedro Lebre who is Caetano's right hand man. He seemed a reluctant 2ic, stating only that everything Caetano did was OK with him and he would only speak with any authority when Caetano was not available. He spoke excellent English. Pedro was busy resurrecting the remains of a small hotel and guest house with the intention of attracting visitors and already had three or four rooms looking good. We were impressed by the newly thatched roof, about 200 millimetres thick and Stuart questioned Caetano about its durability, surprised to be told that it would last for about twenty years or so. He then asked the obvious question about why thatching was not generally used, employing indigenous skills and materials rather than the expensive imported corrugated iron. The poignant answer to that question was that there were still many enemies, thatching was too easy to set fire to.

Chuckie, who was to be staying in Dili longer than the rest of us, immediately booked into one of the repaired rooms for the remainder of her stay, on the grounds of supporting local business – the Dili Palms is Australian owned.

That evening Stuart and I stayed at the Dili Palms while the others went off to another meeting. Kelvin phoned during the evening and asked us to go to the 'Big Wok' (where we had dined the night before) to get a receipt for our meal. We ambled down the road to the restaurant and spoke to the maitre d' who made some comment to the family ensconced behind the counter. The lady responded by smiling broadly in friendly fashion, then she started writing something in Chinese characters that went on and on while we, once again, stood about grinning stupidly. Meanwhile the m d' was busy about his business of maitre d'ing and other than a friendly wave took no further notice of us. After a long wait and lots of writing the lady handed us the result of her handiwork. Stuart asked her if that was our receipt for the meal – in English of course, which she understood as imperfectly as we comprehended Mandarin – and with triumphant smiling and nodding all round, we departed.

Next day Kelvin, when presented with this 'receipt', greeted it with hilarity, then he explained with delight that we had been given a huge and comprehensive list of Chinese vegetables. (We think the m d' had recalled that there had been much palaver the night before about a vegetarian meal and had misunderstood our request, despite his excellent English.)

Today (11<sup>th</sup> September 00) we met Russel Anderson for coffee, Russel is a friend of Stuart and Carson from Southern Cross University and is a journalist – among other things probably. He is in East Timor with Timor Aid I think. (Forum on Sustainable Development). He was also present in Dili when the 1991 massacre occurred at the Santa Cruz cemetery and was right in the thick of it. At that time he was the partner of a Dutch woman (Saskia Kouwenberg). Saskia wrote a report TIMOR LORA SA'E in February this year (for Timor Aid I guess), a copy of which I had read before leaving and had with me during the trip. After coffee with Russel we went to World Vision for a meeting with Caetano and Patrick (Patrick is African and was one of those who attended the Sunday church service). Stuart and I took no part in the meeting. We sat nearby at the table. Stuart, sitting close to the discussions, would



have been able to overhear all that was spoken of and offer input if required. That was not required, so he continued with his own work while I, further down the table, could not hear at all, so wrote a letter to Malcolm Cunningham, with the intention of sending it under a first day cover – Malcolm being a philatelist and appreciative of such things. Although I am not sure what a first day cover is, I had been told by Chuckie that it is the only export East Timor has at this time. I reckoned therefore, that it would be a good idea to kill two birds with one stone – to coin a platitude.

We went to the Giant Wok again for our evening meal and were cheerily recognised by the proprietors and the m d'. Russel Anderson arrived on his motor bike later to join us. This mutual friends and contacts networking regime is interesting to watch in action. The exchange of mobile phone numbers, email addresses and the listing of useful skills of those who are known within the 'do gooder' community and who may be of some use to various causes.

It was at this stage I lamented, to myself, the lack of a tape recorder at the table. Russel is a low key person, extremely personable with blond hair, blue eyes and even white teeth ever evident with his relaxed smile. His constant flow of conversation during the time he was with us earlier that morning had been questing and involving. He was interested, interesting and knowledgeable about East Timor. When he joined us that evening, someone questioned him about the Dili massacre in 1991. He was one of a number of journalists present to cover the deliberations of a Portuguese Parliamentary delegation that had been charged by the UN with the task of investigating human rights issues in East Timor. Indonesia had temporarily allowed foreign journalists into the country to observe and report the proceedings.

In the event the delegation was delayed, then the trouble blew up and they were blocked from further opportunity to carry out their work. Meanwhile the journalists were already in the country. With the intended delegation visit the Indonesians had eased some previous restrictions, and the Timorese were taking advantage of the easier regime by organising a commemoration service at the church. (At the time I did not catch what the service was for although I have subsequently found out that it was for a young man called Constancio Pinto who had been shot by soldiers a few days before). Russel said you could feel the tension in the air with Timorese accosting them in the street, even leaping in and out of their taxis to surreptitiously display their banners that were printed with political and independence slogans.\*

*(The Indonesian authorities had not eased their regime, they had in fact made dreadful threats to the East Timorese; that they would be killed, and their families would be killed "unto the seventh generation" if they dared to demonstrate during the delegation's visit).*

The church was filled for the service and after it was over a crowd of perhaps fifteen hundred to two thousand started to march towards the cemetery. As they made their way along they drew banners and flags from under their shirts to wave about as they marched. According to Russell's story the crowd gradually swelled to an estimated five thousand and the Indonesian soldiers, who had been watching from the sidelines, began to look a little edgy. Demonstrator stewards shepherding the crowd were keeping things orderly, until a small group of soldiers rushed into the crowd to grab one man. There was a struggle and someone was stabbed. There was some shouting and some further struggling, although the march continued, but people were becoming scared and their numbers had begun to fall away by the time they reached the cemetery. It was at this stage Russel said, that a group of soldiers about fifteen wide were seen spaced across the road ahead and they started marching slowly towards the advancing crowd with their automatic rifles pointed directly ahead.



Russel said there was no warning given, no shots were fired into the air, but suddenly there was a point blank continuous firing into the marching crowd. There was immediate panic with people, including Russel, stampeding in terror. Other troops in the meantime had formed on all four sides of the cemetery and had started a compressing action with shooting and beatings as they advanced. Russel said he was able to scramble and hide behind some gravestones until an opportunity presented to crawl clear of damage and bolt from the scene.

I am unsure of Russel's personal story after that, because he then went on to tell of a cameraman who continued to film until a soldier directly menaced him with a rifle. At that point, according to Russel, the cameraman aimed his camera directly at the soldier who began screaming at him, at which moment a sergeant stepped forward shouting at the soldier who retreated. The sergeant then put out his hand to push the camera aside. The cameraman, Max by name, (*Max Stahl a British camera man.*) reacted by shoving the sergeant's hand off his camera while remonstrating, 'that is my camera!' The sergeant replied in excellent English that Max had better get down on the ground immediately, or he would be in big trouble. Max did as he was ordered.

Meanwhile Max's frightened offsider (soundman?) who had been burrowing as far as he could into a small space in a nearby crypt was dragged out and savagely beaten into unconsciousness with rifle butts and boots and was left where he lay. Max, while huddled on the ground, carefully removed his tape from the camera and replaced it with a blank and then slipped the used tape into a crevice near the gravestone he was huddled against.

When the troops had finished beating the other man they hoisted Max to his feet, his camera was taken from him and two soldiers frog marched him to a car, then they drove him to a police station. Russel quotes Max as saying he remembers being taken to the door of the police station and then was conscious of a huge shove in the back and he stumbled through the door, at the same time as he felt his wallet lifted from his hip pocket. The door slammed behind him and he heard the car speed off. There was pandemonium in the station, so he stood waiting for a while before sitting down on the floor to lean against the wall. Gradually the commotion eased and finally one of the Indonesian policemen noticed him and asked what he was doing there. Max replied that things had begun to look dangerous outside so he had sought shelter in the police station. The explanation seemed to satisfy the police who sent him on his way.

He made his way back to wherever the journalists had been billeted. Then, after whatever could be done to sort out the needs of the bashed and bleeding had been attended to and after some of their collective shock had receded, he announced he would make his way back to the cemetery later that night to retrieve his tape. He promised his very concerned mates that he would be extremely careful and take no risks. And that is what he did.

Russel also told in detail of how, as he ran from the cemetery, he saw two Americans surrounded by soldiers, forced to their knees and being savagely beaten. They had their arms extended in supplication, their outstretched hands held their passports and they were screaming and crying, 'American, American!' It was a graphic story picture he drew and at its telling I had one of those instants. I looked deeply into myself for a moment to picture such happenings, and found it salutary to imagine what response I would have available to face such circumstances. I think I know too well.

Whether the graphic scenes of that massacre we in Australia saw on our television screens are from the rescued tape I do not know. (*They were*). In addition, this story I have attempted to tell was hurriedly written the day after it was told at our restaurant table. It is a translation from a continuous monologue given by a man with a quiet voice (leaving me with a disadvantage), who spoke intensely and if without overt passion, compellingly. His experience



of that event is now ten years in the past but he relived it that night and so did his rapt audience. I know I have got details wrong and am aware that as a straight historic relating of *facts*, it would not pass any editorial scrutiny Russel might give it. Nevertheless, I think it is close enough to the truth, as I understood it to be.

The next morning, the day of our departure, we were invited to lunch at Caetano's home where a lovely meal had been prepared for us. There were an impressive number of helpers waving cloths back and forth over the laden table in the hope of keeping flies from spending too much time on the food. Caetano's wife as gracious hostess, smiled and nodded to us all in welcome and we responded in kind. Mrs Caetano, we were told, speaks excellent Portuguese – and presumably Tetun and Bahasa Indonesia. However, with Kelvin's (and Chuckie's I think) knowledge of those languages, together with help from Caetano's English, smiles and nods, accompanied by sounds of appreciation, served as a satisfactory lingua franca to see us through a very special occasion. (*Chuckie has since told me that photos taken of that day now adorn the walls of Caetano's house*).

After lunch Kelvin and Chuckie discussed HOTFLIMA's plans for their cement brick making enterprise with Caetano and then they presented him with a computer that allowed him, with evident delight, to send an old electric typewriter into retirement.

I had a day in Darwin on my way home, my first visit, and I took time to visit the museum/art gallery. I sought it out with an assumption that there would be exhibits referring to cyclone Tracy and the destruction of Darwin in 1974. I wanted to attempt drawing some sympathetic comparisons between the two tragedies. There was a complete gallery dedicated to the event and as I stood there amidst the photographs of the destruction and stark evidence of Darwin's drama and despair, I recognised that there could be no parallel drawn between nature's indifferent mayhem, devastating though it can be, and was, and man's malevolence.

And somehow, appallingly, I grieve that the gender definition is warranted.

Since writing these few pages I have watched a television documentary (I have retained a copy of it), that directly bears on the impressions I have tried to convey. Russel Anderson figured prominently in the programme as does Saskia. (Referred to earlier). The programme, was mainly concerned with the death of a young man called Kamal Bamadhaj who was the son of New Zealander, Helen Todd and her Malaysian husband. Helen and her husband, at the time their son was killed, were working in Bangladesh. Kamal, by this time an Australian university student in NSW, was a young activist who, along with Russel and the other journalists, was in East Timor at the time of the events I have attempted to describe. Kamal, who had sustained a gunshot wound, was found wandering in a nearby street by the Indonesians at some time during the chaos and was shot again, dying later under quite appalling conditions. His mother took General Sintong Panjaitan, who she claimed was responsible for her son's murder, to the courts in the US and won the case against him. The general – from the security of Indonesia – was contemptuously dismissive of the findings and the penalty that provided for about twenty million US dollars compensation. Helen, although not holding her breath in anticipation, has earmarked the money for use by the Timorese. She is, at the moment, working in East Timor. The strong links and the networking I have already mentioned, that binds the 'do gooder' community included not only Russel, Kelvin, Saskia, Kamal and Helen, but our Chuckie who is closely involved with Helen and her work.

I confess to a feeling of warmth, pride even, that Stuart and Carson are also contained within that worthy company.



*(One of the Americans referred to as being beaten, Allan Nairn, suffered a fractured skull during his beating and appeared in the TV programme. I would hazard a guess that he may have been the one to suggest to the Centre for Human Rights in the US that they contact Helen Todd and persuade her to charge General Pantaijan with her son's murder.)*

***“Whether total genocide occurs or not in East Timor depends not only on the remarkably powerful will of the Timorese people, but on the will of us all.”***

**Kamal Bamadhaj 1970 - 1991**

\* The italicised explanations have been added since viewing the TV programme. It provided extra detail that clarified some of the impressions I had gathered at that restaurant table.

We in Australia have grown used to the unquestioning adulation afforded our INTERFET soldiers and the halo attached to their saintly commander. It is a combination of justifiable pride in what we saw as their apparent control of the situation, and possibly a desperate need to collectively relieve feelings of guilt, for our national shortcomings during the past quarter century. The Australian media reinforced our warm inner glow with uncritical reporting of every piece of news pertaining to ‘our’ INTERFET.

And that need be no bad thing. However, it might be suggested that neither is it a bad thing to step back and take note of what others, perhaps less blinkered, might make of some of the events.

With that in mind I have added a few excerpts from Saskia Kouwenberg’s impressions obtained and referred to in her report Timor Lora Sa’e and which I mentioned earlier. Saskia visited East Timor between 30 December 99 and 23 January 00.

(Her report was marked for internal use only and not for publication.)

(It should also be understood that her text would have been translated into English from her original Dutch language report and some syntactical anomalies have found their way into the presentation. Except for the occasional addition of punctuation [not my strong point!] I have only edited where shown).

## **TIMOR LORO SA'E**

Again I cry for you East Timor  
for again  
Timor Lora Sa'e  
again you are not free ...

'How amazing it is to walk around in East Timor without fear!!! No looking around suspiciously to see who is following you, no shots fired, no people running, no roadblocks. How amazing to talk politics with people without fearing buffoons, militia's, ninjas, TNI, Brimob! I was also amazed seeing the beauty in people's faces. From the previous visits in 1991 and 1999 I only remembered worried faces, scared faces, begging-for-the-world-to-know-faces. Now there were countless smiles; intense smiles with thousands of stars twinkling in people's eyes. Specially the children; they did not tire of sharing enthusiastic greetings. I felt deeply touched by their beauty, their happiness.

'I felt awed by the level of destruction caused during the aftermath of the referendum in September 1999. I stared in disbelief through the gates of the house I had worked and lived as project co-ordinator of the independent observers in 1999. Blackened walls were all that remained. All furniture, computers, papers, all that we left when we evacuated in panic and fear, had disappeared. A few pieces of glass which looked like computer screens remained. In a flash I saw two guys in front of the gate talking with me through the locked gate in the afternoon of September 6<sup>th</sup>. They warned me to leave immediately; "Leave now, everything here will be gone soon. Now it is getting serious." I believed them when I heard the ICRC had been attacked as well as the Synod and many parts of Becora Comoro. During this visit I heard that two hours after we had left 'our house' it had been burned down.

### **'The role of INTERFET (8500), CivPol (400 since 7/1) and Military observers (185)**

INTERFET did restore peace. And people are thankful for that.

On one hand they are said to have been far too slow in securing the border with West Timor, even slower with securing the enclave Oecussi and they shouldn't have allowed so many militia [to] escape. On the other hand Jose Ramos Horta points out that there has not been a UN peace force before that worked as flawless[ly] as INTERFET. They are not seen as THE or ONLY liberators; people are very aware of their own contribution and certainly remember the fact that the international community acted far too late and co-operated during 24 years with the Indonesian occupying forces.

People appreciate INTERFET teams doing road work and other basic tasks.

### **'Criticism;**

There are quite some examples given by people who were not happy by the way the Ozies (sic) acted; "they behave like brutes". During my stay the brother of a woman I visited



was arrested because others had accused him of being a militia. The woman was furious about the way he had been arrested; 7 cars arrived, they had ordered the woman in the house on the floor and had been rough. Another story concerned an East Timorese journalist who passed INTERFET soldiers arresting someone. He asked what was going on and was told it was none of his business. He asked again and was then asked his name. When he did not give his name he was insulted and thrown to the ground, handcuffed and a gun was pointed at his head.

'A demonstration was held protesting against the rumour/fact that around one hundred Indonesians were contracted at the airport for very high wages. More than 500 people showed up. It was organised by the AST (Associação Socialista de Timor). Their demands included; stop importation of foreign labour, lower cost of food and construction materials, broaden rice and food distribution. Another demonstration protested against the difference in wages between UN workers and locals. Also former UNAMET workers protested several times: they want to be paid. But UNAMET has lost all lists of their workers, they say they never made backup to New York!! People feel very bitter about this; they did risk their life after all by working for the UN.

'A violent situation developed in the beginning of January 2000 when around 7000 East Timorese applied for jobs at the UN. Stones were thrown to soldiers and the UN. Jose Ramos Horta calmed down the situation. White people present said they for the first time felt uncomfortable and were very aware of the rising tension.

'General Cosgrove, head of INTERFET, has on his way out an interesting view on the recent violence.

"Now we've returned security, people feel safe enough to have a riot, they feel that they are not oppressed, that they can assemble on the street to express a grievance without being shot at".

### **'Foreign Business People.**

New business people arrive every single day. As yet there are no customs at all before entering East Timor [*There is a rudimentary system now – September 00.*] I encountered many Australians: plumbers, electricians, builders, bank directors, restaurant owners, trainers, teachers, representatives of waste-, mining-, car companies, media conglomerates, travel agencies and tourism industries and also entrepreneurs seeking for any business opportunity. Some businesses, such as car hire companies, make buckets and buckets of money. Australian communication giant Telstra has secured a monopoly position in the telephone market. As yet they do not pay any tax, electricity or water bills. (UNTAET has warned them they might be back taxed but there is of course no way to check any figures).

'Most foreign companies pay minimum wages of 20,000 rupees to labourers. One company pays \$A20 a day. They were requested by UNTAET not to pass on this information because it would "set a wrong precedent." (As yet there are no unions but initiatives are under way.)

'I was very eager to find out what kinds of registration procedures were used by UNTAET but did not get around to it. UNTAET claims companies are checked before getting a license. However, one company owner assured me he had not even left as much as his contact



phone number with UNTAET. Further they could not check anything else than criminal records I presume.

'So it is easy for foreigners to come in with expertise and the needed assets to set up a business, but the sad thing is, that this is still impossible for virtually all East Timorese whose complete assets were destroyed, including the money they might have had in a bank account.

'Therefore the fear exists that by the time the East Timorese have their lives on track again, some of the markets may have already been saturated by foreigners. There is of course a limit to the amount of banks, restaurants, shops, electricians, etc. a small country can cope with.'

(1999)