

## East Timor 1999: Tragedy and Triumph. Experiences of a UN Electoral Officer.

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I was fortunate to serve as a UN electoral officer in East Timor in 1999, when that half-island was still “unborn” and in dispute. For twenty-four years, Indonesia had occupied it, after Portugal loosened its three-hundred-year colonial grip in 1974. Then, in May 1999, the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) was created to administer a referendum to allow the Timorese people to determine their future: whether to remain part of Indonesia (under an autonomy agreement) or become an independent nation. The referendum had to be organized within three months!



The heart-warming banner that greeted us at the airport on arrival in Dili. If only things were so loving and simple! Standing below the banner is my friend and college Gongloe from Liberia.

The World University Services Canada (WUSC) put forward my name and sent my resumé to UN Volunteers, a UN programme based in Bonn, Germany, that was to provide electoral officers. After the rapid selection process, I flew to Australia for a few days of pre-deployment training at the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) base in Darwin, which is on the other side of the Timor Sea (Timor Gap). In “Tin City” the incoming civilian peacekeepers received several days of lectures, including from the UNAMET leadership, on the background of the mission and our expected tasks. We were given blue UN vests to wear during our official duties.

When I arrived at the Dili Airport, I was delighted to see a heart-warming banner for those arriving: “WELCOME. If you love East Timorese, LOVE BOTH the pro-integration and the pro-independence.” Then we were sent to our respective region aboard Puma helicopters. I was deployed to the Suai region that borders West Timor, which had been part of Indonesia since that country’s independence from The Netherlands.

We were tasked to register the East Timorese people—and not Indonesian settlers—for the referendum or “popular consultation,” as the Indonesian authorities insisted it be called,

given that the Indonesian parliament reserved the right to make the final decision. We were also tasked to do voter education, teaching people who had never voted in secret before what it meant to cast a ballot. We also promised the Timorese that no matter what the result of the referendum, the United Nations will not leave East Timor.

Visiting an impoverished village near Suai, I spoke with the elders. When I asked how the crop was going that year, the chief told me that they had not planted seeds that year. I was shocked because the people were subsistence farmers. Without a crop they would starve! But he explained that if they planted, the militiamen would come and take the crop by force, so they decided not to plant!

In another town called Zumalai, I saw the church door was boarded up. My translator explained that the local priest, Padre Francisco, had been threatened by the local militia, that if he preached there anymore, he would be killed. So, he took refuge in the church complex at the regional capital Suai.



In the Suai Church complex, I am conducting voter education, telling about 500 Timorese how the popular consultation (referendum) will be conducted.

After I chose the Zumalai Catholic School as a registration and polling site, the same local militia leaders threatened me. They said “they could no longer guarantee my security and that of my team.” I was called a “spy.” (For whom, they did not say, but it was a strong, punishable accusation.) I was particularly worried for the locals who were on my team. Fortunately, a few days later, one of the mission’s military advisers (all unarmed) pressured the Indonesian military to instruct the militia leaders to withdraw the threat. I was much relieved when the militia leaders said it had been a “mistake.” I was not a spy after all!

The mission decided, for my safety, to assign me to a new district and I was given the Suai church complex. To get to know the locals better, and for my own spiritual needs, I decided to go

to a Catholic mass. The Ave Maria church was full to the brim. After the mass, Padre Francisco invited me to conduct a voter education session. So, I told the crowd of some 500 people, that no one, especially the Indonesian authorities, would find out how they voted, or how their community voted. Only the final vote for all of Timor would be announced.



Voter education extended to remote villages, like the one here where myself and another electoral officer, who was from Zambia, interact with the village leaders on the referendum process.

The vote was held on 30 August 1999, and it went much better than I had feared. Having finished the registration work, I was then back in New York City, watching from UN headquarters. The results were announced in New York City and Dili (Timor's capital) on September 6. The people had courageously rejected integration and voted 78.5% for independence.

Within hours, the Indonesian forces and their militia started their revenge attacks. They burned some 90% of the buildings in the capital. My translator's mother and family were forced at gunpoint to vacate her home and board a ship to West Timor. She felt compelled to kiss the militia leaders' feet to get permission to bring a bag of rice to feed her family!

In Suai, things were even worse. The Indonesian-led militia stormed the Suai Church complex and slaughtered about 100 of the people who had taken refuge there. Padre Francisco was the first to be shot, as he pleaded for the safety of the people inside the church. The bodies of the dead were put on trucks and dumped in a swamp in West Timor, only to be discovered much later.

Fortunately, Australia was ready for the worst-case scenario that was unfolding. The international community, especially US President Bill Clinton, put heavy pressure on Indonesia, including by threatening the withdrawal of IMF bank loans, and insisting that the Australian-led International Force East Timor (INTERFET) be accepted. It entered unopposed into Timor. The reign of terror ended less than two weeks after it started and only a thousand lives were lost, including those slaughtered in the Suai Church complex. Sadly, among the dead was a member of my electoral team, Frederico, who had taken refuge at the

church after militiamen saw him informing me of their attempts to falsely register Indonesians.

Shortly after the reign of terror started on 6 September 1999, the UN evacuated all its personnel (except a dozen uniformed personnel holed up the Australian consulate in Dili). Back in North America, I could not help but feel that I had betrayed the people in Suai who were massacred without UN protection. In my anguish, I wrote a poem, tribute of a Timor Lover, to express my appreciation and empathy for the brave Timorese. (Refer to poem on next page.)

Canada contributed forces to INTERFET, and they were placed in Zumalai, where I had been serving and where Padre Francisco had been preaching before the militia first threatened his life. The Canadian peacekeepers helped bring the militia under control and end the threats and massacres.

On October 25, the UN Security Council created a new mission UNTAET (UN Transitional Administration in East Timor) to govern the territory during a period of transition to independence. Thus, the United Nations actually held executive power in the territory for two years. The transitional administration helped develop the war-ravaged economy, build a new police force, and organized parliamentary and presidential elections.



When traveling to remote villages, Indonesia provided an armed escort. The Indonesian escort is photographed behind my team, which consisted of my fellow electoral officer, a UN police (UNPOL) officer from Ireland, our translator and driver (kneeling).

When I was leaving Timor in August 1999, I promised the local staff in my electoral team that I would return to East Timor. In 2001, I was able to keep my promise, though only as a tourist. It was such a relief to come off the airplane in Dili and see benevolent UN guards in blue uniforms instead of Indonesian soldier-occupiers.

This return was very helpful for my personal psyche. Instead of keeping images in my mind of the killings on the streets and at the church, I could now watch children playing in the streets and people still enjoying worship. I also took a photo of a large truck that had on its license plate the words "Love Peace." Having known war, these people had learned to truly appreciate peace, something we take so much for granted in Canada and North America. From this experience, I emphasize to others who deployed to war zones "the importance of going

back” in peacetime. I think the visit helped me avoid Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

During this return visit, I could see a new nation arising out of a very traumatic birth. I felt some pride that I had helped bring into existence the 191<sup>st</sup> member of the United Nations, and I was so happy when the Timorese flag — previously banned in Timor by Indonesian authorities a resistance flag — was now flying alongside the flags of the other nations of the world in front of the UN headquarters on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue in New York City.

In hindsight, I see that my experience had the components of a Greek tragedy: starting with great promise, suffering great tragedy, and ending with a catharsis and a new beginning. This was true for me as a civilian peacekeeper who gained so much from the experience. But it was also true of the international community. It had proven its commitment during the Timor test. Timor was saved and could now contribute to the international community. The new Timor Leste could even send its own peacekeepers — military, police, and civilians — to other war-torn areas of the world to help those peoples find the peace that the Timorese had finally found.

## Tribute of a Timor Lover

*O Timor, how great has been your suffering!  
How many sons and daughters you have lost in your struggle!  
How many fruits you have been denied through the centuries!  
Still, the fairest fruit is soon to be yours: independence.  
You have paid the price with the sweat of your brow,  
with the blood of your people,  
under the whip of foreign taskmasters.  
Struggle, cry and work — all these you did.  
Finally, the world heard your cry and recognized your struggle.*

*We, the United Nations, came to help you determine your future.  
We said: “Your choice, your vote, your future. We are with you.”  
But we were wrong. We allowed ourselves to believe that your  
oppressor would become your protector.  
We led you to the pasture but forgot that it was the location of a slaughterhouse.  
It WAS your vote. It WAS your choice, but it WAS NOT your  
future all together.  
We stood by and then left you as the forces of darkness and prejudice  
enveloped your land.  
Now we return to count the dead and to help the living.  
Still, many of your people remain in the jaws of terror, in another  
land under the control of another power. May they return  
quickly to be embraced by you, O Timor.*

*Through the darkest hours, you have kept the flame of hope alive in your heart.  
You dared against fate and foreign oppression to believe in your future.  
Now from the spirits of your fallen and the hearts of your living will  
surely spring the goal supreme: freedom.*

*Those of your admirers who love your natural beauty, cherish your humility,  
will pledge to do what we can to make your independence dream a reality,  
your freedom a celebration and your security a matter of our own.  
May God give us the strength never to fail you again!  
Viva Timor Leste!*