

Searching for a future in East Timor

Reconstructing a nation's infrastructure after decades of war and genocide is a gruelling process but rebuilding the shattered lives of its inhabitants is an even greater challenge still. **PETER WILLIAMSON** visits the East Hills Safe Haven for East Timorese refugees and considers the daunting tasks ahead.

At the East Hills Safe Haven in Sydney's southwest, 300 Timorese refugees are trying to piece together what has happened in the latest episode of their strife-torn lives. As children shriek and chase each other around the dining hall, adults look earnest and offer weary smiles to visitors.

Another 500 Timorese are soon to arrive to fill the space vacated by departing Kosovars, as the sad saga continues of populations displaced by the upheavals of brutality and war. Some Timorese who found temporary shelter at East Hills are already leaving, like their Kosovar predecessors, to return to razed homes and fallow fields. There they will begin to seek surviving relatives and friends, plant crops and begin rebuilding their nation. Schools, homes and hospitals must be reconstructed, an administration must be put in place, children's education must resume, and many social institutions must be formed from scratch, but the greatest task for many is to recover their own emotional security. Unfortunately, this outcome may always remain elusive.

Mena Soares, a bicultural counselor with STARTTS, currently works at the East Hills Safe Haven with East Timorese refugees. There they are trying to come to terms with

their experiences in Timor and to recover a semblance of normality and emotional security in Australia. Soares herself is a child refugee and survivor of East Timor's chaos in 1975, and knows that for her clients, reestablishing trust is the huge first hurdle.

East Timorese families have been torn apart by the violence. When Soares returned to East Timor two years ago she met an old friend who had been jailed by the Indonesians. Now he is released he takes it out on his family, especially his wife: "He bashes the hell out of her," says Soares. A client of Soares was threatened by her brother, a militia member, who held a knife to her throat, but could not bring himself to kill her.

After years of living in fear of rape, murder, arbitrary arrests, torture, repression and the disappearance of loved ones, restoring trusting relationships will require a depth of compassion beyond the scope of most people. People like the former prisoner now abusing his wife are suffering symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Soares reports that her clients suffer from PTSD symptoms such as nightmares, aggression, flashbacks, suicidal

thoughts and depression. Also, Timorese are suspicious that they may be living among collaborators of the Indonesians. "Living in harmony is going to take years and years to rebuild," says Soares.

Dr Jean Talbot is a psychiatrist practicing in Tasmania with experience in the treatment of political prisoners of the apartheid regime in South Africa. She says that domestic violence often arises as a problem among survivors and, in this way, the problems of the victim are passed onto the next generation. "People who have been rendered powerless, say by war, torture or imprisonment, often come to terms with it by exploiting power when they have it," says Talbot. She is unsure if this phenomenon can be extrapolated to East Timorese society but Soares believes this is the case. She describes children suffering abuse from their abused parents: "It's just going to go round in circles," she says.

The full extent of psychological trauma can take years to emerge and, if not dealt with, it emerges in successive generations. Talbot feels she is still dealing with the legacy of transportation of convicts from Britain, which stopped in the 1840s. Soares says that her people are



East Timorese residents at the East Hills Safe Haven.

still trying to deal with the trauma of World War II when 10% of the Timorese died while sheltering Australian diggers from the Japanese. Later, the civil war and the invasion of 1975 cost the lives of up to a third of the population.

East Timor is facing such a huge task of reconstruction that psychological recovery comes way down the list of priorities. Rise Becker, a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist at STARTTS, says that the Timorese are not ready to begin such work. The first tasks are just establishing contact with others and getting on with the priorities of survival.

The removal of the immediate threat, the Indonesian troops, from East Timor is a first step towards establishing a secure environment. Bringing perpetrators of crimes to trial may be of further assistance to some, but no amount of change can erase

the pain of some peoples' experiences. Rise Becker says that individual circumstances vary greatly. For some, a resolution to the struggle for independence may be of benefit. Individual therapy can continue for years and requires a large input of time by highly skilled professionals. This is completely beyond the resources of the new nation.

"You can't do individual therapy with an entire nation- they are going to have to find another way of coping," says Talbot. Training for key people in the community, such as nurses, teachers, doctors and priests will be of help in dealing with some of the problems as they arise. "In the end, they've got to heal themselves because the numbers are too vast and the resources too thin. They will have to rely on people's ability to find for themselves things that heal," says Talbot.

Anne Wigglesworth, director

of East Timor projects for Caritas, says that people are being encouraged to get on with day to day reconstruction when their first priority is locating relatives and ascertaining who is dead. The United Nations has just revised upwards to 180,000 its figure for the number of Timorese not yet accounted for after the recent turmoil. "Locating the people who have disappeared is simply a greater priority", says Wigglesworth. It is difficult to comprehend the possibility that these people may have been murdered, or the grizzly logistics of how such genocide could have been carried out.

For Soares, the events of September-October 1999 were the worst her people have endured. "A lot of people are very angry that East Timorese people were working with the Indonesians, but it was the only way these people could survive. In East Timorese culture the smile is very important, but behind that smile is a lot of sadness". ■

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