



East Timorese participants at a training session at STARTTS

HEALING A NATION

A recent training program held for health workers from East Timor provides an inspiring example of how to tackle endemic trauma. By HELEN BASILI

East Timor is a country desperately in need of healing. Twenty-five years of occupation and war and a new-found independence forged in destruction and blood-letting, has left a legacy of thousands and thousands of traumatised individuals. It is difficult to comprehend a suffering that has been so pervasive that even the very infrastructure of the nation is damaged. Just how East Timor will be healed, or even if it can be healed, has been an ongoing source of debate among aid agencies, politicians, trauma experts and the East Timorese people themselves.

While discussions are important, the need for action is imperative. With this in mind, staff of the University of New South Wales' Psychiatry Research and Teaching Unit (PRTU) and STARTTS began implementing a mental health program for East Timorese. Coordinated by Professor Derrick Silove, PRTU's director, and Kristina Tang, a researcher and social worker at PRTU and STARTTS, the program involved bringing a group of carefully selected East Timorese to Australia for training in mental health issues and traumatic stress.

Both organisations had been working with the East Timorese community since 1991 and had developed a model to work with the local East Timorese to support their community.

When Nobel Peace Prize winner Jose Ramos Horta visited STARTTS in 1998, discussions were already underway as to how this could be best achieved.

With the violence leading up to East Timor's referendum for independence last year, other Australian services for torture and trauma survivors were also becoming increasingly concerned about the fate of the Timorese people. A national coalition known as the Program for Psychosocial Recovery and Development in East Timor (PRADET) was established in response to this

we didn't know how to begin the program...We had to go [to Timor] and find out what the situation was like," says Tang, who has been appointed the national coordinator of PRADET.

Tang travelled to the East Timorese capital of Dili last November where she met with a variety of non-government organisations and United Nations agencies to find out exactly how they were addressing the issue of trauma and mental health. After Tang's departure, Silove made a follow-up visit with a representative from the World Health

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concern and the lead agencies were PRTU and STARTTS. Other members of the coalition include the Australian Association of Social Workers and services for torture and trauma survivors in Victoria, Western Australian and the Northern Territory.

"Since PRADET had been endorsed by CNRT [The National Council for Timorese Resistance] to help develop mental health services in East Timor, we had to do an assessment first and find out what the first step was to be, because

Organisation and gradually the idea of a training program was refined. Funds were derived from within the PRTU budget and from AUSAID to bring 10 East Timorese health workers to Australia where they would spend six weeks being trained by mental health and trauma experts including staff from PRTU and STARTTS.

Tang went back to Dili in December, this time with Gloria Hall, a Darwin-based representative of CNRT, who assisted her in recruiting participants. It was a gruelling process



activities suffered the death of a husband or child who was. Additionally, a lot of women had been sexually assaulted: "That's why we sat together and discussed the possibilities and then organised ourselves as an organisation [ET-WAVE] to fight against this violence," said Renata, speaking through an interpreter.

"I founded the organisation [two years ago] to liberate the people in general and especially the women and also because we wanted independence," she said. While setting up ET-WAVE, Renata was also working full-time as a public servant for the Indonesian government, a job she has lost since the Indonesian withdrawal from East Timor. "Sometimes in an emergency case I was forced to leave the job and go and work for the

working for the Indonesian government, and was interrogated and tortured.

ET-WAVE is currently involved in organising emergency aid for the many children who have become orphans in East Timor. They also provide counselling to survivors of the violence. It was for this reason that Renata wanted to attend the training course in Sydney. She said she was looking forward to returning to East Timor and being able to apply her newly acquired skills: "Now we understand what is the definition of [post traumatic stress], how we can deal with the trauma, how we can help the people that suffer from trauma, how we can approach the people and how we can counsel the people".

The 10 health workers returned to East Timor on 20 April, just after Tang arrived back in Sydney after a third visit

Tang has been looking at establishing a psychosocial resource centre in Dili where a further 50 East Timorese professionals will be trained in mental health issues and trauma counselling.

organisation behind the bosses back," said Renata.

The 'emergency case' was often a woman who had recently been sexually assaulted: "We would talk to her and explain to her the rights of women and then the organisation would take all the details and according to the details, they would fight back against the government," she said.

According to Renata, there were only about 20 people involved in ET-WAVE when it was first established. People were fearful that if they were active members of ET-WAVE they would be exposing themselves to reprisals from the Indonesian military. In fact, this was the tragic scenario that befell the president of ET-WAVE. Renata said she lost her job

to Dili. On behalf of PRADET, Tang has been looking at establishing a Psychosocial Resource Centre in Dili. A further 35 East Timorese professionals will be trained in mental health issues and trauma counselling at the Resource Centre. It will also be a place for providing consultancy and training to other agencies working extensively with trauma survivors.

Despite East Timor's horrific experiences there is still an abundance of hope. The participants in the recent training program were representative of many East Timorese in that they are determined to have a better future for their country. After fighting so long and so hard for independence, they are facing the prospect of healing their nation with courage. ○

that involved publicising the training program to relevant non-government organisations and then sifting through the many applications that came in. They decided on 10 individuals, most of them nurses, representing four organisations: East Timorese Women and Children Against Violence (ET-WAVE), the Christian Children's Fund, Timor Aid and the East Timorese Health Professional Working Group.

The East Timorese arrived in Sydney to commence the training program on 4 March 2000. They were joined by four East Timorese who had arrived in Australia earlier and were part of a large group of refugees staying at a Safe Haven in East Hills. Another two East Timorese who are Australian residents also participated in the training program.

Maria Renata is the founder and Vice-President of ET-WAVE and was a participant in the training program. Renata had long recognised that East Timorese women in particular were suffering under the Indonesian occupation. Even those who were not involved in political



Above:
Maria Renata, Vice
President of ET-WAVE

Right:
East Timorese
participants in the
training program at
a welcome barbecue