

**MARC CHAUSSIVERT**  
writes about his  
experiences as part  
of the Australian  
delegation to East  
Timor for the  
Consultation on  
Mental Health and  
Psychosocial  
Development.



# Post card from East Timor

The light aircraft banked to the right revealing the deep-blue water of the ocean below. I could make out some buildings on a foreshore that I assumed was Dili. Behind these buildings were sharply rising mountains. Having landed and disembarked we walked off the tarmac past a pallet of boxes with the inscription 'military weapon cartridges'.

Arriving in East Timor felt somewhat unreal. It was one of those things that I never really imagined during the solidarity events and demonstrations in support of East Timorese independence during the eighties and nineties. The struggle for East Timor was iconic and, somewhat like the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, it was hard to adjust to the change when it arrived. Part of the difficulty was believing it could happen when all the media coverage and statements from various politicians and commentators conveyed that one had to be rational and face the facts that East Timor would always be a part of Indonesia. I think many of us kept our hopes up more out of some kind of faith than because of evidence before us. It was

always heartening to hear Jose Ramos Horta's optimism based on a careful political analysis and his prediction of an imminent free East Timor in 1998.

Being in East Timor for eight days in June meant that I would be tied to specific tasks relating to my attendance at the Consultation on Mental Health and Psychosocial Development in Dili. My impressions of the country are based on the few snapshots I glimpsed during this time.

The initial images that stay with me after arrival at the airport are of the dusty main road of Dili with its large UN military vehicles, the Timorese people travelling in overcrowded minibuses or on motor cycles, and still others walking on the road itself. Many buildings had been destroyed or burnt out but people are busily carrying on with activities all around. This was to be a lasting impression, that despite the destruction and the difficulties, there was also hope in the air – the Indonesian occupiers were gone and

people were now getting on with their lives and rebuilding their country in whatever way they could. During my stay I always found people to be open and friendly to us as visitors and in my interactions and encounters, I never felt the palpable tension and despair I had felt in the post-violence environments of Central America.

The consultation I was attending in Dili had the broad aim of supporting the development of mental health and psychosocial initiatives in East Timor. Participants coming from many different occupations and regions spoke of their vision and commitment to rebuilding and developing East Timor and showed a willingness to work alongside each other in achieving this end. I was fortunate to be able to have some extended conversations with a number of the participants who shared something of their work and hopes for the future.

Filomena dos Reis of the Communication Forum for East



Timorese Women (FUCOPERS) told me of her work in support of East Timorese women who had been victims of violence committed by the Indonesian military. She told me that many women had had their husbands killed by the military and had been raped. Many were alone and without any assistance so FUCOPERS was set up in 1997 to support them. Filomena spoke of how difficult a task it was to do this and that the workers sometimes felt like breaking down. Despite this, they mustered their strength and courage and were able to continue supporting their sisters. There were great physical risks taken in providing such help, often through disguising their identity in order to go to areas particularly targeted by the Indonesian military and sometimes smuggling women out of these areas to bring them to safety.

Florentino Carvalho a staff member of the Program for the Psychosocial Recovery and Development of East Timor (PRADET) talked to me about his artwork. A series of his drawings were displayed at the consultation, which he had produced to raise awareness of the pain and difficulties faced by

the people of East Timor (See page 34). The images were clear – family members killed, houses burnt down, people tortured, children separated from parents. This was not imagined material but a reality, drawn according to what had been witnessed.

**Despite the destruction and the difficulties, there was also hope in the air – the Indonesian occupiers were gone and people were now getting on with their lives and rebuilding their country in whatever way they could.**

However, Florentino told me his drawings were also for the people who had suffered. As those overwhelmed asked themselves “How can we survive now when we have lost so much?” the pictures also illustrated the basis for hope and the possibility of assistance through a new service that he was committed to building. Addressing such trauma was a prerequisite to building a new nation. In this task Florentino was going to use the training he had obtained through PRADET and he hoped was that Australia would continue to support the East Timorese working for the program.

Elsewhere this determination and hope was evident more symbolically, for example in the burnt out house converted into a restaurant. Even the business card had the name of the restaurant printed across a picture of flames. This courage was also displayed in the defiant graffiti left on the external walls of the restaurant celebrating the defeat and departure of the militias and Indonesian soldiers.

There is no doubt that despite the overt and truly Herculean achievements of the East Timorese struggle undertaken over the past 25 years, East Timor has entered a difficult transitional period. In many ways the current challenges are more complex and morally ambiguous than those that have preceded them. For example, how

to efficiently allocate and distribute relief assistance; how to manage land distribution and usage; and how to provide services in a way that addresses immediate needs yet maximises local participation. All this must occur in a context where local participation has been excluded for

many years. Consequently some frustrations and tensions are evident and spoken about, as these questions and others are grappled with.

Having achieved independence, there is also the sense now of needing to come to terms with the psychological impact of 25 years of repression and devastation, as Florentino Carvalho had emphasised.

However his words and artwork were consistent with the overwhelming impression from the consultation proceedings and from the lengthy discussions with other participants, that the East Timorese people are ready to face these challenges and work together to rebuild their country. This was also the feeling I got in my limited travelling around Dili and neighbouring villages to the East where people were clearly continuing with their daily lives and were not consumed by despair. Let's hope that this enthusiasm can be met by an equal commitment from the international community so that they work in true partnership to facilitate this transition and not overstep the level of involvement that is appropriate and respectful of its role as an invited outsider. ■

*Marc Chaussivert is a generalist counsellor and team leader at STARTTS.*



Photos taken in East Timor by Marc Chaussivert