

ICWA LETTERS

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Southeast Asia

Curt Gabrielson, a science teacher and an Institute Fellow, is observing the re-establishment of education in East Timor.

The Youngest Nation

By Curt Gabrielson

JANUARY 4, 2001

DILI, East Timor—On the day of my arrival in East Timor, I stood sweating outside our house in the scant shade of a papaya tree and watched children play. Shrieking and running, the group of a dozen or so kids of all ages occupied themselves for over two hours with five different games for which the most sophisticated equipment was a plastic bag full of other tightly compressed plastic bags. I was very impressed, and wondered if the youth that I had just left in California could match the creativity and enthusiasm I witnessed in these kids.

Our short side-street in the capital city of Dili happens to shelter over one hundred kids, including the residents of a Catholic orphanage. I came to East Timor because I am interested in the future of these kids. Specifically, I want to learn all I can from watching the design and development of an education system for this newest nation in the world.

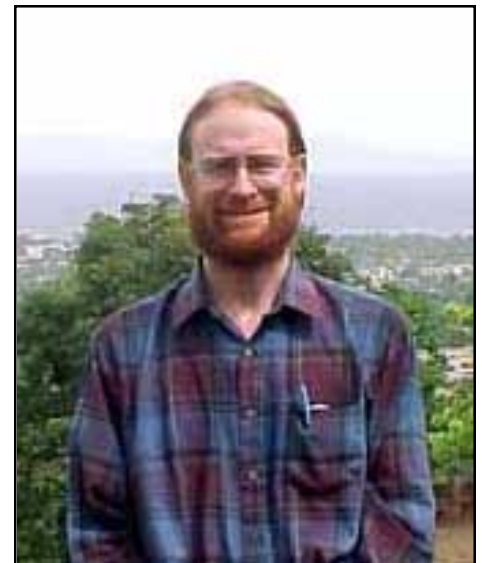
Last year, well over half the schools in East Timor were destroyed or ransacked. Two-thirds of the teachers had been Indonesian and nearly all of them returned to Indonesia. The entire education system collapsed, as did most organs of government. Now the East Timorese have begun constructing a new system of their own design. The shape and style of the education system that emerges here will have great impact on the future of this people.

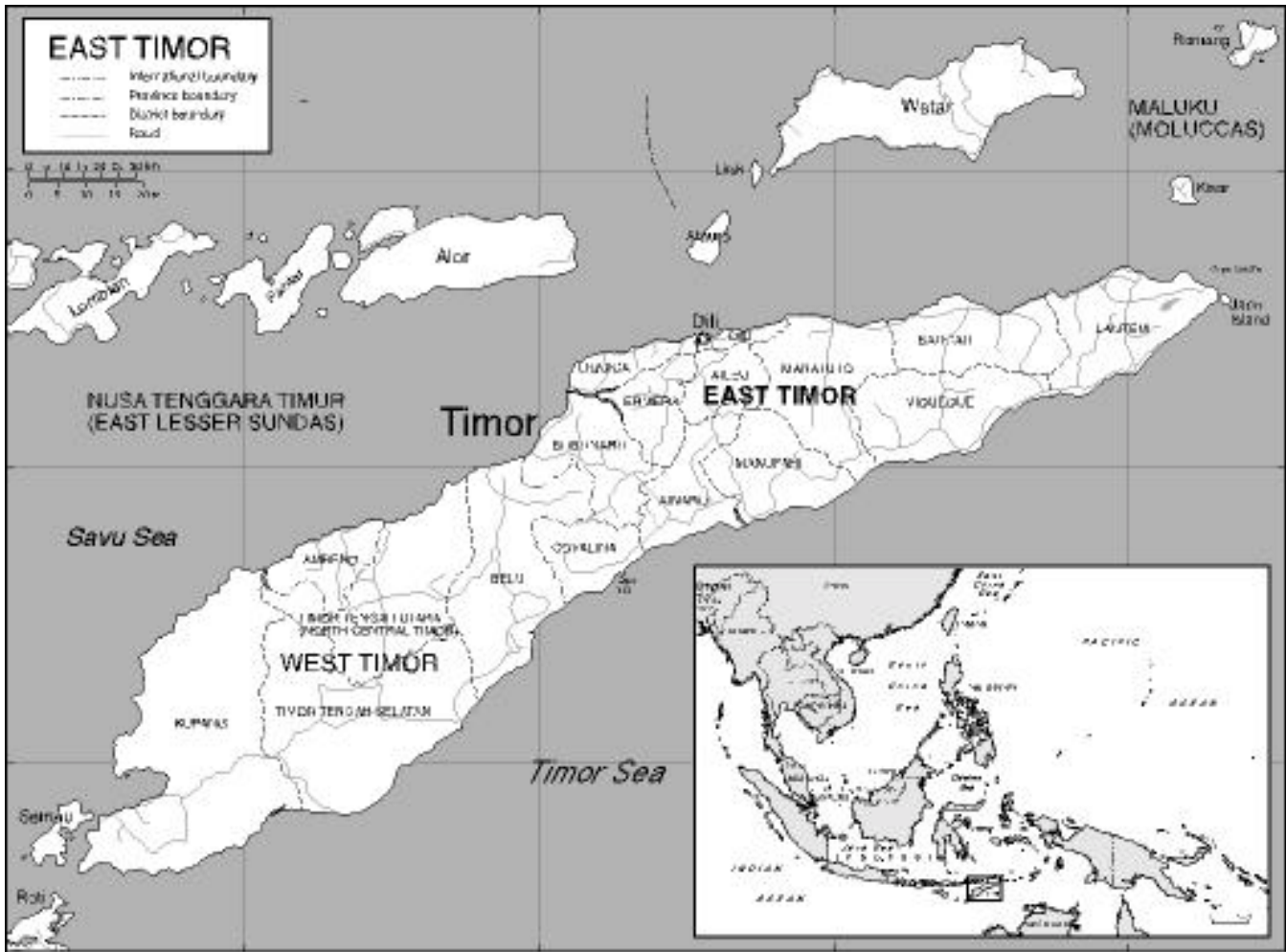
I am delighted with the opportunity ICWA has given me to be here during this critical time in East Timor's history. I can see that I will gain much insight from the children of East Timor, and I will do my best to convey what I learn in these newsletters.

When kids in Dili notice you in the distance, they'll announce urgently to each other "Malae, Malae!" Then as you get closer, they'll wave and exclaim, politely or not, "Hello, Meester!" If you ask them their name, most will offer a Catholic Portuguese Louisa or Constancio. If you ask their nickname, you'll get a distinctly local syllable or two, often with a shy giggle.

For the 400 years leading up to 1975, the Portuguese were present on Timor in one way or another. Missionaries, pirates, traders, and sometimes diplomats from the government of Portugal, these colonists had a large influence on the cultures of East Timor. But the original foreigners of East Timor were the Malae: South East Asian people from Malaysia or Indonesia. Building on that obsolete terminology, East Timorese term Europeans "Malae Mutin," (mutin = white), Africans "Malae Metan," (metan = black), and Chinese "Malae Xina."

My partner Pamela and I are part of a vast group of Malae now present in





East Timor. With nine thousand soldiers in the UN Peace Keeping Force and four thousand other internationals doing work of various sorts, not a day goes by in which

the kids of Dili do not get a chance to practice their English. Muscular Portuguese men in berets direct traffic around the busy intersections, modern-day missionaries from Australia and the United States stride through the narrow streets looking for potential converts, and civil servants from all over the world stumble busily around the UN headquarters.



Portuguese "Civpol" officers keep an eye on traffic around the Dili market.

To explain this huge influx of foreigners and the violence that took place last year we must look back to the early 70's when East Timor was still an official colony of Portugal.

In 1974 a coup in Portugal resulted in a relatively liberal Portuguese government that allowed East Timor to make preparations for independence. Political parties were formed and a decolonization process was begun, but the Indonesian government soon began covert operations with the goal of bringing East Timor under its influence. Much false propaganda was distributed,

and ultimately a short civil war was incited. By late 1975, Indonesian efforts had proved ineffective and an independent socialist government had emerged in Dili with enormous popular support.

On December 7, 1975 the Indonesian military, then called ABRI, invaded East Timor. They committed heinous atrocities against the local population, including systematic rape, mass killings, and targeting of political leaders. ABRI forces killed over 60,000 Timorese directly with bombs and bullets within one year after 1975, and by the mid-1990's close to a third of the pre-invasion population of 800,000 had died as a result of the occupation.



The beautiful Maubisse valley in central East Timor and some of its residents. Much of East Timor is covered with harsh mountain terrain.

The international community, to whom the new East Timorese government had repeatedly pleaded for support, proved to be a dubious ally. Both the United States and Australia had full knowledge of the invasion before it occurred and took no steps to halt it. U.S. President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger were in Jakarta the day before the invasion, and asked only that the invasion to be delayed until their exit from the country. Altogether, the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council raised ten different resolutions on the Timor issue, but the U.S., Australia, and other western nations consistently blocked any action to rectify the situation.

According to U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Patrick

Moynihan, "The [U.S.] Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook [on the Timor issue]. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success." The U.S. supplied 90 percent of the weapons used in the initial invasion of East Timor, and continued to provide aid, training and weapons to ABRI throughout the occupation.

I have asked many friends and acquaintances here about their personal experiences during the occupation. It is painful to listen to them, and shame is not too strong a word for my feelings when I find that they know all about U.S. complicity in their suffering. My neighbor, Pedru, 55 and father of 16, can tell you his story in Tetum, the lingua-franca of East Timor; Portuguese; Bahasa Indonesia; or Mumbai, another local dialect. Pedru is unemployed, so he has a lot of time to talk. He spoke to me in Tetum over a small set of tattered family pictures.

Pedru was a common soldier in the Portuguese army in 1975. As Portugal was pulling out, he quit the army and did not join that of the new government. He had never fought in all his years as a soldier, and was not interested in doing so. He and his wife had six children at the time of the invasion.

On the day of the invasion, Pedru and his family fled the ABRI violence in Dili. He followed soldiers to one of their secret bases in the jungle of central Timor. There he and his family stayed for three long years. They had no house and no



The port city of Dili from the mountains rising sharply to the south of it. In the distance is the island of Atauro, also part of East Timor.



Pedru and some of his family in front of their temporary home.

fields. All six of his children died there of hunger or sickness.

After three years, Pedru's brother developed bad relations with the leaders in their mountain refuge. He cautiously went back to Dili and found a place to live. Soon he was able to help Pedru and his wife return also. They started a new family and lived nine years on the outskirts of Dili before Pedru found employment. He raised food on pitiful sidehill fields and sold whatever surplus he could generate. When his family had money, they bought rice. When they had none, their primary food was cassava roots.

Pedru is a survivor. He has never been to school, but he picked up the Indonesian language in the same way he had picked up Portuguese: chatting with the "Malae" and listening in to their conversation whenever he could. He soon knew enough Indonesian to achieve a position in the Dili regional department of agriculture. His life improved with the steady salary and things were going all right for him and his family during the late 1990's.

In 1998, during a period of economic crisis and widespread dissent in Indonesia, the nation's 33-year President Suharto was forced to step down. By that time, the international solidarity movement for East Timor had built up a great deal of pressure on Jakarta to address the East Timor issue. Suharto's successor B.J.

Habibe yielded to that pressure, and in January 1999 agreed to a long-requested referendum, monitored by the U.N., that would decide the future of East Timor. Habibe promised that the outcome would be honored by Jakarta.

Representatives from the U.N., Indonesia, and Portugal negotiated the terms for the referendum. In the end, Indonesian police and military forces were left in charge of security for the vote, and the U.N. presence in East Timor was completely unarmed.

The results were disastrous. In the months leading up to the referendum, local pro-Indonesia militias were strengthened and new militias were formed, all under the di-

rection and support of the Indonesian military (now called TNI). TNI forces brought vast numbers of weapons into the territory and distributed them to the militias. The militias carried out several massacres taking the lives of hundreds of East Timorese, and intense intimidation was felt by all, including foreigners. The militias promised complete destruction of the country if the vote turned out for independence.

On August 30, 1999, 98.6 percent of those registered turned out to vote. My partner Pamela was one of hun-



Pedru's youngest son Abel (far right) gets a birthday party from his friends and sisters.

dreds of foreigners present to observe the vote, and she testifies to the continued intimidation by militia and TNI personnel even around the polling stations. However, there were no gross violations during the voting or ballot-counting process, and the results were announced four days later.

In an incredible show of courage and tenacity, the count showed 78.5 percent of the East Timorese population in favor of independence from Indonesia. But by that time, the well-planned destruction had already begun. In the next three weeks, TNI and the militias destroyed over 70 percent of the infrastructure of East Timor. They burned entire villages, killed over a thousand people including priests and nuns, and forced approximately 250,000 East Timorese out of their country and into camps in Indonesian West Timor and other islands. Hundreds of thousands fled once again to the mountains.

Before the vote, the U.N. had distributed literature and created large billboards stating that they would not abandon the people of East Timor after the vote. Within a week after the results were announced, the U.N. presence had diminished to around 30 people holed up in the U.N. compound in Dili. Militia surrounded the compound and fired weapons over the walls day and night.

Almost all the other foreigners present for the vote had been intimidated into evacuating East Timor. Pamela was one of the many whom TNI and Indonesian police dramatically escorted to the airport through streets full of marauding militia. TNI claimed that the militia were out of their control, but many people, local and international, bore witness to the collusion and teamwork between TNI and the militia.

The international community, true to form, hesitantly discussed and debated possible actions to be taken. President Clinton waited six days after the start of the atrocities to cut off U.S. weapon sales to Indonesia, and refused to organize an international force to intervene. Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, among others, meticulously planned out strategies for intervention, including air drops of food to those stranded in the mountains, but made no move before Jakarta was in agreement.

I found Pedru's experiences during and after the referendum typical. Scared by militia intimidation, he and his family stayed in their house as much as possible in



The hospital in Ainaro was among the many buildings destroyed by militia.

the weeks leading up to the vote. Being conspicuous was a sure way to invite trouble, so they went out only to get supplies. He told of Indonesian leaders promising free food, clothes and houses if the vote came out in favor of Indonesia.

After the day of the referendum, Pedru and his family watched in terror as the streets descended into chaos. When they saw an opportunity the next day, they took what they could carry and fled to the forest. The place where they ended up was crowded with people on the run. Pedru said they worked together to guard their spot from militias. This is a remarkable statement, in that they had no weapons, and the militias were well armed.

They lived in the forest for three weeks, eating whatever they could find and often going hungry or thirsty. Scouts from their group would descend periodically to check the situation in Dili. The little colony of refugees eventually saw Australian ships off the coast, but could not tell what they were doing.

On September 20, 16 days after the announcement of the referendum results, after the destructive plans of TNI and the militias had essentially been carried to fruition and untold numbers had died of hunger and thirst in the mountains, a multinational military force led by Australia landed in East Timor in coordination with the departure of the last Indonesian forces. The long, painful Indonesian occupation had come to an end.

Pedru and his family returned to find their house burned out and someone else squatting in it. Pedru had no money to fix up the house, so he let them stay and moved into the house of some relatives. He hopes to fix



Rebuilding the market in Suai.

up his old place in the future if he can earn some money.

The current feeling in East Timor is calm, but tense. There are minor skirmishes on the border, and flare-ups surrounding the families returning from West Timor. Relief efforts are winding down with most families' minimum food and shelter requirements met. Evidence of last year's destruction is ever present in form of charred buildings and piles of rubble.

Overall, the Timorese people are greatly relieved to be living free of terror and overt control, but still hold a strong healthy skepticism for us foreigners and the UN. I was speaking to a friend who works for a local human-rights organization.

"Your country has had many colonizers." I observed.

"Yes, first the Portuguese, then the Japanese during World War Two, then the Indonesians, and now the UN and World Bank!" he replied.

This wise cynicism is perhaps displayed most visibly among East Timorese education leaders. Though working under extreme limitations and lack of resources, they are at the same time very wary of foreigners who want to "help." Many an international-aid agency has been turned down without explanation when offer-

ing a proposal of assistance.

Not all educators here express resistance to foreigners, though. Father Armindo runs the Covalim district Catholic high school, which is the only high school in that district to be up and running at this time. He teaches several classes of religion every morning, and then travels around the parish helping to organize other schools in the afternoon.

He told me his country is like a little baby now. It needs help to eat, crawl and walk. Since there were very few opportunities for East Timorese to hold leadership positions under the Indonesians, there is now much to learn on the job. Father Armindo thinks foreign help is crucial to a quick and healthy recovery for East Timor.

In the coming months I will become acquainted with many more teachers and students here in East Timor. As my Tetum improves, I plan to be involved in teacher training and curriculum development in some peripheral manner using my background in hands-on science education. From this vantage point, I hope to witness firsthand the extraordinary construction of East Timor's education system in the larger context of the growth of this nation. I feel another fine fellowship has been launched by the Institute of Current World Affairs. □



The charred remains of buildings are still a common sight throughout East Timor sixteen months after the referendum.



Neighborhood kids came to sing Christmas carols at our house nearly every night during the week before Christmas.



One of the many elaborate nativity scenes that sprung up around Dili before Christmas.

For further information :

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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. Greg sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A lawyer dealing with immigration and international-business law with a firm in the Washington, DC area, Leena will study the status of women under the "islamization" of Pakistani law that began in the 1980s and continues to this day. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she is a Muslim herself and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

Whitney Mason (January 1998-2000) • **TURKEY**

A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

Jean Benoît Nadeau (December 1998-2000) • **FRANCE**

A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

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