

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Carole Beaulieu
Mary Lynne Bird
Steven Butler
William F. Foote
Pramila Jayapal
Peter Bird Martin
Ann Mische
Dorothy S. Patterson
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
Chandler Rosenberger
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle
Sally Wriggins

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

CG-4

Southeast Asia

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

First Impressions of the UN in East Timor

By Curt Gabrielson

APRIL 3, 2001

DILI, East Timor –My first encounter with the United Nations in East Timor came on a drive to Aileu a few days after my arrival in the new country. The road encounters harsh mountain terrain while still within Dili city limits. As the crowd flies, Aileu is a mere 20 kilometers from Dili, but the road is 39 kilometers long and takes an hour and a half to travel. We were halfway to Aileu when we came upon a small convoy of enormous UN cargo trucks transporting rice. The trucks were so long that they had to stop at many of the sharp turns, back up a bit, and then proceed. We were in a small pickup, ready to pass them if given the chance. But the chance never came: we were stuck behind them, breathing their heavy diesel exhaust, for nearly an hour until we reached Aileu.

The second impression came a few days later. I was walking in downtown Dili when a huge armored UN vehicle approached with a terrible roar and stopped nearby. A camouflaged man with an automatic rifle squeezed out the side door and strolled up to a nearby shop. He inquired about a bicycle for sale there, paid for it, and wheeled it back to the UN transport. He swung the bike up to a compatriot who had poked his head through the gunner's-hatch on top. With the bike held precariously on its roof, the vehicle roared away.

Shopping while fully armed and hogging the road are but two of the ways that the UN has made a poor name for itself in East Timor over the last two years.

Recent UN activities in East Timor began with what became known as the May 5th Agreements. These Agreements, signed May 5th, 1999 at the UN in New



The central UN offices in Dili. The same parliament buildings housed the governments of Indonesia and Portugal.

York, were amazingly enough between Portugal and Indonesia, East Timor's two most recent colonizers. Indonesia had been administering the country by force for 25 years, but — since the UN had never recognized Indonesia's occupation of East Timor, nor the declaration on November 28th, 1975 of an independent Democratic Republic of East Timor by FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) just before the Indonesian invasion — Portugal was still on the books as possessor of East Timor.

The May 5th Agreements laid out a plan for the referendum Indonesia's then-President B.J. Habibie had unexpectedly offered on January 27th, ending 24 years of violent Indonesian opposition to East Timor's self rule. UNAMET (United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor) was given a mandate on June 11th by the UN Security Council, and arrived in East Timor shortly thereafter. UNAMET, composed of around 900 international personnel along with several hundred local staff, was faced with the Herculean task of setting up 200 registration/polling stations to begin voter registration by June 22nd.

Widespread violence and intimidation by pro-Indonesian militia, who were armed, trained and paid by Indonesian military forces, impeded the UN's work from the start. Indonesian support for the referendum had come only under the condition that Indonesian armed forces alone would remain in charge of security. The UN forces were thus unarmed, and the same forces that had brutalized the East Timorese for two decades went to great efforts to subvert the entire referendum process.

To this day, Ian Martin, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the East Timor Popular Consultation and head of UNAMET, claims that when the UN proceeded with registration and voting in the face of clear violations by the Indonesian military, it had made the best decision

given the circumstances. According to Martin, the alternative could very well have been no referendum at all. It is true that Habibie's presidency had limited tenure with elections nearing in Indonesia, and that he had precious little support for his decision to allow a referendum in East Timor. This issue remains bitterly argued.¹

Though the registration start-date had to be moved back to July 13th, within the 20-day registration period that followed the UN registered 446,666 East Timorese, far more than had ever registered to vote in Indonesian elections. This was a remarkable organizational and diplomatic feat, especially considering the Indonesian resistance to the operation. More remarkable still was the courage of the Timorese to come in such large numbers to



¹ UNAMET's predicament should be viewed with historical perspective, and the US responsibility for the recent bitter history of East Timor should not be forgotten. At any time during the 25 years of Indonesian occupation, the US could have supported UN intervention or, better still, discontinued enormous ongoing military assistance to the Indonesian armed forces. But US military assistance to Indonesia did not stop until after six days of post-referendum chaos and death.

registration and voting stations in the face of such intense intimidation.

The horrendous destruction that followed the announcement of the referendum results is described in my first newsletter.

On September 20, 1999, the first armed UN forces entered East Timor. Called INTERFET (International Force for East Timor), their job was to secure the region and coordinate the departure of Indonesian forces. On October 25, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) was given its mandate in Dili. It commands the current Peace-Keeping Force (PKF) and is the temporary functioning government of East Timor. Over the past year, both an Executive Cabinet (half East Timorese members) and a National Council (all members East Timorese) have been chosen, and all sectors of UNTAET are working to train and transfer their work to qualified local staff. All of the familiar UN agencies are here as well: UN Development Program, UN Children's Fund, UN High Commission on Refugees, the World Health Organization, the World Food Program, etc. The number of international UN staff is currently at just under 13 thousand.

It is still too early in my residency in East Timor to



Graffiti in Suai: "I LOVE YOU MILITARY INTERFET FOREVER"

draw conclusions about the UN, but I will convey here some of the initial impressions I have gathered, both personally and from the East Timorese I associate with.

The clear image I retain from the UN offices I have visited is one of complete artificiality: all items imported, icy-cold air conditioning, and plentiful bottled water. The image is extended to their vehicles, which all seem to be powerful four-wheel drives whether or not they ever leave the pavement. These fat UN vehicles speed around the half-island like locusts, often with but one occupant.²

Ego, who works for a farmer's cooperative, was telling me his experiences with UNTAET and had the following summary:

"The UN can be described by one phrase: 'Never get out.' They never get out of their office, and if they ever do, they never get out of their car."

UN offices are generally housed in buildings where the local versions of their offices will be located in the future. From a distance though, it looks as though the UN is occupying all the best buildings. And it is true that UN employees reside in some of



The bone pile for UN cars in Dili, a stark testimony to the hazards of road travel in East Timor

² I have noticed UN vehicles' speed to be consistently higher than that of local cars. They frequently whiz past groups of pedestrians and, predictably, a number of East Timorese have been killed by UN trucks.

the best houses in town, because they are able to pay the highest rent. Many factors such as this contribute to a growing frustration with the UN by the local population.

A friend heard the children in the Dili market chanting over and over: "Mister, mister UNTAET, Buka sosa hotu deit!" which translates to: "Mister UNTAET just wants to buy everything!" It is an observation that is hard to deny. There are numerous stores offering wares from Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. The prices in these establishments are higher than prices in California and totally out of reach of anyone on a local salary. Naturally, there is a perpetual swarm of UN vehicles outside these shops. The same holds true for restaurants, many of which have been established entirely for the expat community. The whole economy has been distorted

lowest-paid UN international staff member is the United Nations Volunteer (UNV). The roughly 700 UNVs are paid \$2,250 per month. The average local UN staff person gets approximately one-tenth of that salary. The average UN international salary stands at 300 times the per-capita income for East Timorese, currently at just under \$300 per year.

To make another comparison, UN air operations alone (primarily helicopter service to and from PKF bases) amount to an expense approximately equal to the entire new government's proposed budget: \$59 million per year. That comes to \$160,000 per day. Bottled drinking water for staff cost the UN \$4 million last year, and it was all imported (mostly from Indonesia). It has been estimated that if the local bottled-water company would have been given the UN contract, 1,000 jobs would have been created and recycling the containers would have been much smoother.³ It has been further estimated that the entire water system of Dili could be rehabilitated for around \$4 million, giving running water to over 100,000 people, including UN personnel.

While inefficiency and the misuse of money are frequently heard complaints against the UN, accusations of arrogance and paternalism are also common. Too many times UN personnel have arrived with what they consider very relevant experience and well conceived plans, and have left the locals completely out of the operation.

One glaring instance of this was UNTAET's program of Civic Education. The UN determined, quite rightly, that to insure the successful outcome of the coming elections a great effort would be necessary to educate people concerning the workings of a democracy. UNTAET thus proposed that 8 million dollars be put toward that end. Upon inspection, however, it was seen that over seven million dollars of those funds were earmarked for international consultants.

When this came to light, there was a huge protest by local civic NGOs (Non-governmental Organizations),



Inside the UN compound, Dili: A few of the water bottles that will make it back to the recycling center.

by the presence of so many highly paid internationals, and locals have to pay resulting higher prices for many items.

Money is the focus of many of the criticisms of the UN, and indeed the numbers are staggering: the UN spends over a billion dollars per year in East Timor, which has a population of around 800,000. And how exactly is the money being spent?

A few statistics help to illuminate the situation. The

³ Thanks to the UN's consumption of bottled water, the schools of East Timor have a nearly infinite supply of 1.5-liter plastic water bottles with which they can do many fantastic science experiments. Unfortunately, many of the bottles end up in the rivers, ditches, and garbage dumps.

some of which already had their own programs and plans for doing civic education, and none of which had been involved in planning the UN program. Fortunately, the coalition of NGOs was successful in forcing UNTAET to halt their plans and work more closely with local groups.

This debate took place a few months ago when the US was arguing viciously over how to count the votes of the pathetically small fraction of our population who found it relevant to vote in the last election. It was ironic to the point of embarrassment that the head of UNTAET Civic Education, a program to teach East Timorese about voting and democracy, was from the US (none other than Peter Galbraith).

I have come to call it "Presumption of Understanding," when international personnel arrive with plans in place and do not make an effort to understand the unique local situation.

I met a woman in charge of a program to provide counseling to East Timorese children who were traumatized in the recent violence. She was in the process of contracting my East Timorese friend to sew 400 stuffed dolls to be used in puppet role-plays with the traumatized kids.

My friend frankly offered her negative opinion of the project, explaining that dolls are not common toys for children in East Timor, that even the word puppet brings to mind Indonesians with their shadow puppets (not a desirable effect when trying to comfort troubled children in East Timor), and that while desperately needed, surely there must be a more appropriate method for doing trauma counseling. The UN woman responded that she had seen dolls used well in Kosovo, had heard that they were a great success in Rwanda, and then proceeded to plan the doll production.

This woman appeared very competent to me, not arrogant, and in fact very kind. Her good intentions seemed beyond question. And the need was certainly there for the job she was undertaking: it is estimated that 97 percent of East Timorese experienced some form of trauma in the violence surrounding the referendum, and most experienced it in multiple instances and multiple forms. At the same time, a deep understanding of local culture must be attained before counseling, as well as numerous other important social services, can be car-

ried out effectively. I am finding that the UN all too often falsely assumes it arrives with that understanding.

In the face of such rampant criticism, the UN here is understandably guarded. Almost everyone I know who has contact with the UN has experienced difficulty getting information from UN offices (myself included). I happened find myself talking to a journalist at a party in Dili.

"How *is* information distributed by UNTAET?" I asked.

He laughed dryly and shook his head. "It isn't. You have to wrench it out, bit by bit."

Last year a confidential UNTAET memo leaked that expressly forbade any internal memos, confidential or not, to be shown to non-UNTAET staff. And a transparent, democratic process is one of UNTAET's primary stated goals.

Locals I have talked to are more appreciative of the Peace-Keeping Force (PKF) than of the UNTAET governing body. They say that an international armed presence is still very much needed to insure the free development of East Timor. Today, that presence amounts to just under 9,000 soldiers from 25 different countries.

"We're the fuckin' Paddys, and they're the fuckin' Kiwis!" A friendly, red-nosed commander was introducing my partner Pamela and me to the Ireland/New Zealand Peace Keeping Post in the remote border village of Fatululik, Covalima district. It was hard to hear him over the drone of the gasoline-powered mosquito fogger



PKF base near the Fatumean border, Covalima district



A heap of rubbish created by PKF bases around Baucau, scavenged by local residents

with which his men were blasting away at various puddles nearby.

These soldiers' existence must seem larger than life to the locals. All supplies are brought in to the base by helicopter or truck, while the village has no public transport to Suai, the nearest town. A makeshift shelter on the base houses dozens of jerrycans full of petrol, and the ground surrounding it is dark with spilled fuel. A large diesel generator chugs constantly day and night, providing light, music and cold beer, while the village has only wood to use for energy. The men eat largely the same diet they would in their own countries, composed entirely of imported food, while the locals import only a few items such as noodles and sugar. The post is unmistakably military, surrounded by razor wire and sandbag gunner-stations, but since there has been no violence recently, men laze around shirtless.

"Do you want some water? We

have plenty of water." Without waiting for our answer, he ordered someone to put a huge box of the familiar bottled water in our car. "We give whatever we can to the locals when we have extra, but it is hard to divide it among them."

Pamela and I left the base pondering how their gifts affect relations between locals, and who would clean up their area when they were gone.

While civil servants within UNTAET from all over the world work together, the PKF is divided into battalions according to their home countries. Locals will gladly compare and contrast the various battalions. The Thailand Battalion in Baucau is loved for their ability to learn the local dialects, and their assistance in setting up a community agriculture center that includes the breeding of silk worms. Similarly, the Republic of Korea Battalion in Los Palos is getting along great with the locals by becoming involved in many community affairs including a center for training in martial arts.

On the other hand, there have been several allegations made against the Pakistan Battalion in Covalima concerning sexual harassment of local women. I have heard many comments that Portuguese soldiers, of which there are many battalions, are arrogant and expect all locals to speak Portuguese to them. The Jordan Battalion near Baucau recently made an arrest, apparently in error, which resulted in the burning of a UN vehicle and the stoning of several UN staff. No one was killed but the Jordanian soldiers were subsequently confined to their base. The next day a banner appeared in the Baucau market voicing support for the PKF in general, but telling the Jordan Battalion to go home.

The UN in East Timor is being criticized at many levels both locally and abroad. Some call into question its



The palatial UNTAET headquarters in Manatuto with additional prefab offices, made in Italy, at left

very right to presence here. It seems fair though, to require a better, alternate plan from the critic.

Acknowledging the monumentality of the task set out for the UN is also in order. The situation on September 20, 1999 was not at all conducive to building the government of a new nation. Cities were completely vacant, the militias and departing Indonesians had ravaged East Timor's infrastructure, human resources were in extremely short supply, chaos was close at hand. Today the situation is markedly different. While problems abound, there is order in the streets and an embryonic government is taking shape.

The PKF has done much work to secure the border against the Indonesian-backed militias that continue to make incursions from West Timor. International police without local biases have been instrumental in untangling many a civilian dispute. While there is much incompetence swirling within the UN organism, I know many qualified UN employees who work hard and skillfully in their positions, break through unimaginable bureaucracy and achieve significant results.

It is hard to imagine that East Timor could have arrived at its present stable state without the UN. It makes good sense to have people from all over the world here to provide input based on their experience and knowledge, and to train locals in the day-to-day tasks of civil service. I am not making excuses for the many serious faults of the UN by praising their achievements, but if East Timor can become a healthy, functioning nation, it will have been worth every inefficiently spent tank of UN petrol.

Furthermore, the international community, particularly those nations that supported Indonesia for the last 25 years, have a moral responsibility to support East Timor in its efforts to gain true independence and construct a democratic government. The UN as a body representing the world of nations is the obvious player to offer that support.

The UN is nightmarishly bureaucratic, almost by definition, and often unwieldy in its actions. But it is a valuable resource that *can*, with correct democratic structures in place, be put to good use. The East Timorese, along with internationals who are in solidarity with them, are slowly learning how to do this.

Pamela and I were recently eating supper with the family of Arsenio Bano, executive director of the NGO Forum, an umbrella group for nearly all national and international NGOs working in East Timor. Arsenio was bemoaning the UN for its lack of respect for the work NGOs do, and its inability to apologize when it is in

error. He said he was looking forward to the day that last UN helicopter would take off and fly away. His wife Kerry then spoke up and offered that perhaps he should not be so hasty: the UN could come in quite handy if various political parties begin to use bullying tactics to gain power or control. He had to nod in agreement.

Currently, the PKF is scheduled to operate for at least two more years, and UNTAET is phasing out international personnel as quickly as it deems appropriate. At the same time, Sergio Vieira de Mello, the Brazilian who heads UNTAET, has promised to stay as long as necessary to insure the peaceful birth of the nation. The words of one of the ICWA board members come to mind: "The UN is like a terrible guest: It can never bring itself to leave when the party is over." UN personnel have been in Kashmir for over 50 years. But I seriously doubt Arsenio and his country people will allow the UN to stay that long in East Timor. The hunger for true independence has been burning within them for far too long. □



Banner placed in the Baucau market after unpopular arrests were made by the Jordan Battalion. In faint lettering, it says, in English and Tetum, "We people of East Timor love and respect PKF. We don't receive the action of Jordan Army. The people of East Timor have the right to justice and peace. We don't like intimidation like before. From: The People of the Market."

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. 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 Farnelo (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 Ecker 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."

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4257**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

©2001 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation. The information contained in this publication may not be reproduced without the writer's permission.

Author: Gabrielson, Curt

Title: ICWA Letters -
South Asia

ISSN: 1083-4257

Imprint: Institute of Current World
Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: East Asia; The Americas;
Mideast/North Africa;
Europe/Russia;
Sub-Saharan Africa

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.