

ICWA LETTERS

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

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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.

Improving What Is

The following is the text of Fellow Curt Gabrielson's report to assembled Members and Trustees of the Institute at the Cosmos Club, Washington, DC, on Saturday, December 7, 2002

My thanks go to the Institute trustees for the opportunity to carry out a brilliant fellowship. Thanks also to Peter for excellent editing and advice, Ellen for making the newsletters look great in print, and Brent for continually filling my bank account upon demand. I'll truly miss all three.

I hear that East Timor is not exactly front-page material in the US press these days. So, before I share some of the insight and ideas I've gained from my time in East Timor, I'd like to fill you in on some recent happenings there. I'll also get you up to date on the current status of various aspects of East Timor's reconstruction that I've reported on over the last two years.

As East Timorese work to recover from the disaster of Indonesian occupation, East Timor's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation has taken its first steps. Modeled after various Truth Commissions in other countries, including South Africa, the Commission seeks to get at the truth of the violent events in the nation from 1975 to 1999. This is done by means of receiving and publishing some 10,000 testimonies from East Timorese of all walks of life. The Commission also has a community-reconciliation component in which those guilty of minor crimes have the opportunity to apologize to the community, and pay back victims in ways determined by the village as a whole.

Though the Commission bylaws require that all serious crimes be tried in a court of law, some criticize the Commission for attempting to take on work that should be carried out by the national justice system. While the Commission's budget is \$4 million, East Timor's courts are in a state of chaos, and the Serious Crimes Unit, among others, is pitifully underfunded. Another obvious criticism the Commission receives is that the majority of those responsible for violence in East Timor have long since fled to Indonesia.

Around 30,000 East Timorese still haven't returned from West Timor since running there during the military-led violence surrounding the vote for independence in 1999. President Xanana Gusmao has traveled there several times to implore them to return home. Among those still in West Timor are many ex-pro-Jakarta militia members and their families who fear having to face justice back in East Timor. The U.N. High Commission for Refugees still runs programs for those wanting to return.

Indonesia is currently conducting *ad-hoc* trials of 18 men accused of pepe-



Curt Gabrielson

trating violence in East Timor in 1999. To date, 12 have been tried. Out of these 12, only two have been found guilty and sentenced. Both are East Timorese. Every Indonesian military official tried has been acquitted. This has raised quite an uproar in East Timor, though no one had held much hope for justice in these trials. True international criminal trials are not likely, though many in East Timor and elsewhere continue to insist that conducting such trials is the only realistic way to insure justice for East Timor.

In terms of economic justice in East Timor, Australia is not showing signs of support. The prime ministers of Australia and East Timor have recently signed a treaty dividing the petroleum wealth lying in the Timor Sea, off the half-island's southern coast. The deal is being touted by Australia as a generous gesture to its small northern neighbor, with 90 percent of the revenues slated to go to East Timor. In truth, the 10 percent that Australia claims is estimated to value 20 billion dollars, and if today's international law of sea boundaries were honored, 100 percent of this wealth would be East Timor's. Fortunately, the East Timor Parliament has yet to ratify this treaty. East Timorese civic groups (as well as Australian solidarity groups) are loudly protesting the agreement as an ugly historical relic of Australia's collusion with Indonesia during its 24-year illegal occupation of East Timor.

All the while, East Timor's leaders are delicately trying to maintain good economic relations with Australia. East Timor is vulnerable as a small, relatively poor country, and needs all the good relations it can get. East Timor's leaders have been visiting various countries in Asia with the goal of creating economic links and luring foreign investment into the nation. East Timor's leaders hope to gain entry into the ASEAN group, and find the country's niche in the global economic terrain.

At the same time, development funds for the world's newest nation show signs of slow evaporation. Both Yayasan HAK, East Timor's premier human-rights organization, and FOKUPERS, the main group in East Timor giving support and advocacy to women victims of violence, have experienced severe funding crises in the last two months. HAK was forced to close its doors for a month, and a few days before we left, FOKUPERS had a difficult strategy-planning meeting in part to decide how to move forward with far less funding. It seems that many aid organizations now see East Timor as last year's funding focus and are beginning to take their funding to other regions.

East Timor's farmers, who constitute most of the nation, are also bracing for possible crises. The rains are late again this year, making it twice in the course of three rainy seasons we experienced. Certain important crops must wait until the rains arrive to be planted. When I visited our farmer friend Silverio last week, I saw his fields clean and well fenced, but still empty. We heard rumors of hunger in more remote mountain villages, and saw springs dry that we had never seen dry before. Some say the rains in East Timor are on a long, continuous decline, as in other regions of Asia and Africa.

Despite the delay in planting, our friends in the village of Bukoli are doing ok. The tiny community got one small grant to construct a community center, and another to set up a small radio station to operate from that center. Friends from a popular-education group in Dili, East Timor's capital, are working regularly with the people of Bukoli to organize activities and classes in the new community center. The hope is that Bukoli can serve as a model of community organizing for the rest of the country.

Speaking of models, East Timor's Nobel Prize-winning bishop, Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, went to Rome not long ago to discuss with the Vatican the possibilities of installing a third bishop in the tiny nation, or even a Cardinal. Upon his return, he announced that he can no longer fulfill the role of the bishop for the Dili Diocese. Bishop Basilio do Nascimento of Baucau, East Timor's second largest city, has been called to step in for Belo temporarily until another qualified bishop can be found.

In the area of Physics education, an area dear to my heart, the five teachers I trained to be trainers gave a final two training sessions while Pamela and I were on the road in Indonesia. All accounts say they did a fine job. They are in the process of planning the second-level

training sessions to begin in January. More than 95 percent of the nation's middle and high schools sent teachers to participate in these trainings. These trainers have also taken on the job of teaching Physics lab at the National University and seem to be doing it well. The organization of East Timor's Physics Teachers recently begun has received a small grant from Oxfam and lab and office space in the National Teacher Training Center.

And finally, about East Timor's fascinating language situation: The national constitution, ratified before independence earlier this year, states that there are two official languages, Tetum and Portuguese. Yet a great tension continues to exist between those East Timorese who want the nation to speak Portuguese and those who don't. Earlier this year a huge recruitment was carried out to find potential primary-school teachers who can teach in Portuguese. Currently, first through fourth grades in primary school are being taught in the Portuguese medium. According to the plan, in three years East Timor will need Portuguese-fluent middle-school teachers. My colleagues, many of whom are middle-school teachers, just roll their eyes, saying that they have no intention of learning Portuguese. They predict that the government will not be able to muster such human resources in a few short years. Still, the government of Portugal, and to a much lesser extent that of Brazil, continue to bolster the use of Portuguese in East Timor. There are also many avid followers among the East Timorese elite. But Father Trans, Principal of Baucau's Catholic high school, who I quoted in an early newsletter, has become, if anything, more bitter about the government's decision to use Portuguese. He recently told me with great confidence that East Timorese will never learn Portuguese, and that the language will continue to be used to separate the elite from the masses.

* * *

From my newsletters on widely scattered topics, you may have seen that I've learned about a lot of different things in East Timor (and I hope you have too.) One thing that underlines my experience over the past two years is the insight I gained into how East Timorese deal with the past, with history. The US is bound up tightly with East Timor's history, so it's important to try to understand this.

I've found that history is much more alive for East Timorese than for me or many of those I grew up with. Twenty-five years ago is not so distant from today for most East Timorese. I think the high degree of trauma in East Timor's recent history plays a large part in this ready remembrance.

The vast majority of East Timorese experienced tragedy at one or more times under the 24 years of Indonesian occupation. Most are prepared, even anxious, to remember it, talk through it, draw conclusions, learn lessons. It seems to me that recalling this terrible history is part of a natural, healthy process.

Pamela and I have often pondered how ever-present the past is for East Timorese. We have listened in on many conversations between East Timorese, in which the topic is firmly based in events of today or tomorrow, but then flashes suddenly to a vivid recounting of the past. Dates and even times come easily, and are put together with places and people and key events to solidify the memories:

Did the militia come to your house on the 6th or the 7th of September in '99?

Where did you run?

How long did you stay in hiding?

Did you flee to the same place in '75?

Did the military pursue you?

Did you get help from the armed resistance?

Where were you during such-and-such a massacre?

Did you have family members killed?

Many people told us their stories of horror, often very spontaneously. Last week, while we were saying goodbye to a friend, she turned the conversation to her experiences 20 years ago fighting for the resistance guerillas, then surrendering, being jailed, tortured, released

and finally forced to take up the Indonesian language to survive under the occupation. A good friend of ours came to the US and was recently on a radio show when he was overcome with grief stemming from his inability to stop the military terror unleashed on East Timor in 1999. He shared the details with us later, and cried again. A few months back, we took a weekend trip to the mountains and visited a friend's family. Not long after we arrived, the mother asked that we take her in our vehicle to the county police station to see the site where the Indonesian military had tortured her in 1986. She had not been back since that terrible time. East Timorese police let us in to the compound to look around. Her cell was still there, as was the water tank into which she had been forced naked, and left to shiver for hours. She showed how she had been hooked up to a telephone dynamo and given high-voltage shocks. She thanked us for going with her, and wanted us to tell her story to everyone we could.

So the painful past is alive for the East Timorese. Both former President Clinton and former Secretary of State Kissinger have made statements to the effect that it is better for East Timor to forget the past and focus on a fresh start. For the East Timorese, this is bizarre surrealism, and bad advice to boot. Both psychologists and sociologists would agree that grieving, healing, and reconciliation begin by remembering together. And from a political and legal perspective, remembering requires that those responsible for past tragedies be called to question.

The recent history of East Timor is quite significant for me personally, in that I was alive and have memories corresponding to the times of East Timor's key events. On December 7, 1975, twenty-seven years ago today, Indonesia invaded East Timor, killing around 60 thousand in the initial onslaught. Friends of mine lost children in the atrocities of that time, children who would be my age had they lived.

Around 90 percent of the weapons used in that invasion were supplied by my country. My President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger, then visiting Indonesia, gave tacit approval for the invasion the day before it was carried out. They then went to work to spin the atrocities to the press as a small, inevitable, foreign problem. East Timor did not exist for my family and me. On the day of the invasion, I was five years old, and helped my brother celebrate his 8th birthday. I recall my brother and I happily sporting special red-white- and-blue bicentennial caps by the time of our family vacation the next year. By that time, the Indonesian army was driving East Timorese resistance high into the mountains.

In 1980, the Indonesian military controlled most areas in East Timor, after having wiped out the last of the original leadership of East Timor's army, called FALINTIL. Part of this campaign was the intense bombardment of the immense Mount Matebian in eastern East Timor. On the mountain, thousands of villagers and FALINTIL fighters had taken refuge amid dense forest and plentiful caves. A great many of them died in the bombardment. I recently drove near the mountain with a man who had escaped from Matebian together with Xanana and a small FALINTIL contingent. My friend pointed out as we drove along where the Indonesian military had had strongholds, where his ragged band had slipped through, where they cached their meager supplies in caves and their eventual route of escape to the west. Another friend, just five years old at the time, recalls running with her family up the mountain then running back and surrendering to Indonesian troops. Though her family was not harmed, she recalls another woman whom the troops found alone in a field and raped.

At that time, I was in fifth grade, a budding young scientist and proud American, pleased that my candidate, Ronald Reagan, had won our middle school's mock election and the national one as well. I was happy to be rid of President Carter, though I knew nothing about his increasing, by a factor of ten, US military-equipment sales to Indonesia. East Timor was still nonexistent to me.

On November 12, 1991, Indonesian soldiers opened fire on a group of peaceful demonstrators in the Santa Cruz Cemetery in Dili. They killed over 270 people on the spot, and many more later at the hospital. Pamela and I know many people who were there and whose friends or family members were killed. Many of those killed were my age. They had a goal of

changing the repression they were suffering under, and died trying to reach that goal. At that time I was in my final year at college, and my goal was to choose from among the various promising paths open to me after graduation. I had just recently heard of East Timor. I recall writing an article about US hypocrisy in the war against Iraq. I cited East Timor as one of several examples where injustice and human-rights abuses had taken place without US outrage, but rather with full US support. However, I didn't know much about East Timor — I wasn't even sure where exactly it was.

The next year, 1992, I finally learned a good part of the story of East Timor from the documentary *In Cold Blood*. The film included video footage of the Santa Cruz massacre that foreign reporters captured and smuggled out. I began to write occasionally to my Congress people regarding the US position on East Timor, but still did not begin activism in earnest. Meanwhile, East Timorese friends I have today were doing all they could and risking death and torture to capitalize on the worldwide publicity that the Massacre had brought. Their entire focus was to strategize for change in East Timor.

By 1999 I was together with my partner, Pamela Sexton, and through her, finally involved seriously in solidarity work for East Timor. Pamela had been active for East Timor since 1991, and I worked from home to support her on several trips there leading up to and during the independence referendum of August 30, 1999.

I didn't often tell my story of contact with East Timor to friends there. But when I did, I found that they already knew how the US faithfully had supported the brutal Indonesian military throughout the occupation. Most tried to diplomatically excuse me by noting that a nation's government is quite different from its people. It was up to me then to explain that, no, in the US we have a democracy that works to some extent, and this means that, in theory, the government follows the will of the people, or at least the majority of the people. Furthermore, when we in the US feel something is not right, a given foreign policy for instance, we have various, fairly safe methods we can employ to try and change it. However, the US did not make a significant push for change until the East Timorese had suffered almost 20 years of Indonesian military violence.

At this point, I was sometimes tempted to apologize. But feeling that this would not be such a constructive offering, I tried to explain the pervasive ignorance about the rest of the world that exists in the US. This, despite an enormous and well-funded media.

* * *

Peter is fond of saying that the Institute sends out fellows not to change what is, but to see what is and report on it. He'll go on to say that if a fellow wants to change what is, that's fine, but they can wait until after the fellowship. I found it all much more complicated than this.

For instance, within four months of my arrival in East Timor, I felt confident that I could offer something of value to the science and math teachers there. I figured that they would be interested in seeing a different method of teaching based on observation of simple experiments. When I found a chance to work with some teachers, I jumped at it; I began working hard to change what is in East Timor.

Then, nine months into the fellowship, a local education leader asked me to write down the lessons I had been teaching and create a manual for teachers to use throughout the nation. I saw that I could possibly change the way all the students in East Timor learn Physics. I did my best to make that change, and had quite a bit of success.

At the same time, I'm still learning about East Timor. There are plenty of things about the nation that I don't know enough about to try to change. I admire the philosophy of the Institute, and hold it critical that we citizens of the world's only superpower learn more about reality in other places in the world. (This brings to mind the motto of Mrs. Henry, my sixth-grade teacher: "Don't be ignorant!") She would thus frequently scold us for not know-

ing what we had had the opportunity to learn.) But once ignorance is gone — and it doesn't necessarily take two years of resident research to lose it — I believe we have a responsibility to do what we can to change what is for the better.

As I consider East Timor's history, I find many points where intellectuals from the US, including myself, had the opportunity to take action to change the tragic situation there, but didn't. Furthermore, when US arms sales to the Indonesian military were effectively cut in 1997, it was due in large part to actions by US intellectuals who were not satisfied with what is and acted together to change it.

East Timor is only one example. As Pamela and I found on our recent trip through Aceh and West Papua, there are plenty of people all over the world today desperate to change what is, because what is is miserable, and not at all conducive to the well-being of humans or the planet we live on.

Not infrequently, what is involves our nation supporting injustice and suffering in far-away places. We must be especially sensitive to the human and ecological effects of our nation, our military and our corporations. We should always be ready to admit that often these effects are unhealthy, and need to be changed.

It's our choice: We can use the power that we possess as US intellectuals to work together with people that have less power and support their efforts to improve their lives. Or we can use our power exclusively to elevate our own position, amass a comfortable wealth and engage in pleasant academic discussion about what is, without ever acknowledging our privileged perspective, or taking action for change.

I believe the Institute would do well to make "Improving What Is," an integral part of the greater fellowship experience. Peter's endless and fascinating stories of former fellows, trustees and other Institute relations lead me to believe that a great many were and are indeed securely focused on changing what is for the better. Peter spent a lot of time on his visit to me trying to root out what exactly I would be doing upon completion of my fellowship. He did not hide the fact that he wanted me to take action, be influential, make change.

I do want to make change. I see opportunities everywhere. Last week, a student of mine was talking to me about my plans. He said he was happy to have learned from me, and thanked me for everything. But then he said I was wrong to go home before I had given him and his colleagues everything I know. He said East Timor is greatly lacking in technical knowledge and will need that to build a strong nation. He said I had taught them only 20 or so experiments over the past year, and that I must know many more.

He was smiling, but he was serious. He is determined to make a change and needs all the support he can get. I was inspired by his forthright determination, and walked away thinking about whether I couldn't find a way to continue supporting him.

Pamela and I were continually educated and inspired by many of the East Timorese we met. As they work day by day to build their nation, we feel a deep connection to them. We intend to continue working with the East Timorese from a distance. We also intend to do what we can to make the actions and policies of our government good for the people of East Timor, and the rest of the world as well. □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

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 economist 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.

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.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

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

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