

# 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.*

## U.S. Responsibility in the West Timor Refugee Crisis

By Curt Gabrielson

JUNE 1, 2001

DILI, East Timor –The middle-aged man with red, betel-stained teeth and dirty work clothes looked at me as if I was a bit slow-witted. He spoke slowly and enunciated clearly for me.

“It’s like this, *Senhor*: The only information we received was from militia and from Indonesian radio. We had no idea it was safe to come back. We were told there was a war going on in East Timor, and much violence against returnees. In the end we decided, live or die, we must return home. After all, it’s our land!”

Mr. Barrus, a farmer from the village of Cailaco, Bobonaro district, was responding to my questions about why he stayed so long in West Timor (the west half of the island, belonging to Indonesia), and how he finally decided to return home. He and 18 of his family members suffered in West Timor for a year, living in a borrowed shack and eating what food they could gather, scrounge or raise on the tiny plot of land they were loaned. They received help from the government of West Timor in the form of three kilograms of rice per adult per month (a quantity that I calculate would last me less than one week *if* supplemented with oil, vegetables, salt, etc.). Worst of all, the militias who had dragged them there in the first place — gangs of East Timorese trained, armed and funded by the Indonesian military — continually harassed and intimidated them.

Twenty-one months after the referendum, through which the East Timorese



*Mr. Barrus, far right, and some of his family at their home*

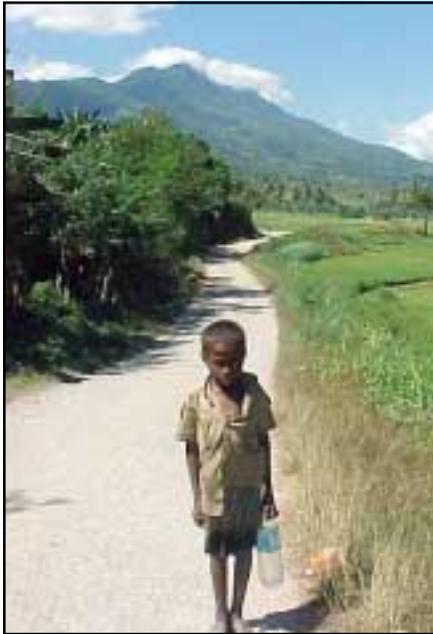
gained independence from Indonesia, there are still an estimated 80,000 displaced East Timorese in West Timor. The reason for this lies not in East Timor, but primarily in Jakarta and Washington. A look at recent history and the situation in the refugee camps today makes this clear.<sup>1</sup>

My first newsletter chronicled the systematic destruction of East Timor after the referendum of August 30, 1999. A major element of that human tragedy was the forced

removal, by Indonesian-military backed militias, of some 250,000 East Timorese people to West Timor and other places in Indonesia. Those who could escape to the mountains of East Timor did so; the rest were taken from their land. It is now clear from Australian intelligence reports and leaked Indonesian military documents that this exodus was a highly orchestrated event, planned well in advance by the Indonesian military. (What is also clear is that Australia, and quite probably the U.S., knew about



<sup>1</sup> For convenience's sake, I will refer to East Timorese stuck in West Timor as refugees. Strictly speaking, though, a refugee flees his or her land, whereas the vast majority of these East Timorese were literally carried out, and are being violently prevented from returning.



*A local boy in front of Mt. Ruelaco near Maliana, Bobonaro district. People from this area who were able to flee to the far side of the mountain during the violence of 1999 escaped being deported to West Timor.*

these plans before they were carried out, concealed this information, and took no steps to avoid the resulting carnage.<sup>2</sup>)

The mass deportation went on for approximately three weeks following the vote and preceding the arrival of international military forces. The personal stories of terror from this exodus could fill a library. One man who had been openly pro-independence<sup>3</sup> before the vote told me in animated detail of escaping militia violence immediately after the referendum by conniving his way onto a ferry bound for Kupang, capital of West Timor. Unfortunately, militia members had boarded the craft as well and recognized him as he was exiting the ferry in Kupang. They harassed and threatened him, then told him to wait on the gangplank. He managed to slip back onto the boat when they were not looking and hid in a toilet for hours until the ferry departed for Bali. He was able to slip past the militia on the dock at Bali, but knowing no one in Bali, he lived on the street for over a month before scrounging enough money to return to East Timor.

My partner Pamela's friend Lina also made it onto a small boat bound for Bali. Aboard the vessel, she and her husband laid low, but after a few days militia members on the boat rounded up her husband and a group of other men whom they accused of being pro-independence and forced them into a small room. Their wives could hear their agonizing screams for hours as the militia thugs tortured them. Lina described the horror of

hearing the screaming suddenly stop. She and the other women disembarked in Bali, totally traumatized, and never saw their husbands again.

Militias, with their ever-present patrons, the Indonesian military and police, forced the vast majority of the deportees onto crowded trucks, sometimes allowing them to take a few things, other times herding them like livestock at gunpoint, and carted them across the border to West Timor. Mr. Barrus and his family were taken this way, bringing nothing with them, and not even knowing their exact location when they were dumped off the truck. There were no provisions for them upon their arrival: no shelter, no food, no health or sanitary facilities, no land. Nor were the people of West Timor pleased with the sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

Pamela visited several refugee camps in West Timor in October 1999. The streets were tense in the towns and cities of West Timor with rampant false propaganda about UN atrocities and the evil of foreigners. Pamela used connections within the Catholic Church to gain access to the camps. The situation was grim. Militia leaders in close collaboration with Indonesian military units ruled the overcrowded shantytowns. Food and health problems were mounting, and relief organizations were encountering opposition from the military and militias as they tried to meet the needs of the displaced masses.

In April 2000, Pamela traveled again to West Timor



*The Bebat river crosses the border from West Timor here, north of Maliana. Atambua lies just beyond the hills in the distance. Though the UN Peace-Keeping Force patrols the border constantly, harsh terrain makes it difficult to seal.*

<sup>2</sup> See <http://etan.org/et2000c/december/24-31/24silent.htm> and <http://etan.org/et99b/september/5-11/11west.htm> for more information.

<sup>3</sup> As described in my first newsletter, the 1999 UN-sponsored referendum gave the East Timorese people a choice between independence and "autonomy" status under Indonesia. The ballot had but two squares one could mark. Despite extreme intimidation, 78% of voters chose independence.



*Jacinta, far right, was a nurse from Ainaro district who was hauled with her family to West Timor. She was able to find work in the hospital in Atambua, and helped to patch up a UNHCR worker last September who had taken machete slashes in the head and neck. She returned to East Timor in late April this year, still very apprehensive about conditions in East Timor due to propaganda spread by the militia in Atambua.*

as guide and translator for a congressional delegation from the U.S. She was aghast to find the situation scarcely improved. Relief efforts were slowly moving forward, though repatriation was but a trickle, and the same squalid shantytowns remained. People continued to die from common, curable diseases, and militia big-men still openly controlled the scene. Though less visible, the Indonesian military was still present and, according to reliable local sources, continued to carry out military training with the militia groups.<sup>4</sup>

Five months later, tension in the camps rose to a peak when militia members murdered, burned and dragged through the streets three international workers of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in a camp near Atambua. One, Carlos Luis Caceres-Callazo, was a U.S. citizen.

Soon after this atrocity, the UNHCR, along with nearly all other relief agencies, abandoned its work in West Timor and has yet to return. The only major international organization serving the refugees today is Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). JRS

runs its large but low-key operation through the Catholic Church of West Timor.

And what does JRS have to say about the current state of affairs in the refugee camps? Plenty. "People are still dying," said Father Edi Mulyono, director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in West Timor, in a recent interview. "It's the rainy season, the camps are muddy, sanitation is poor, there's no running water, malnutrition is rife. Babies are born tiny and undersized because their mothers are so undernourished." As a result of these hideous conditions, an estimated five children die each day throughout the camps, and diarrhea is reaching epidemic proportions. Food has run out in many locations, and the local government is loath to hand out more.

A former head of JRS, Father Raper of Australia, reports that JRS has recently closed down humanitarian operations in one set of camps due to a marked increase in violence. "There is no process of accountability for the perpetrators of the violence, and in those camps are many militias," he said. This violence adds severity to the bleak plight of the refugees.

JRS sources also report that tension is mounting between the Indonesian military and the militias. Recently there have been signs that the military is clamping down on militia activity in a few camps, and actively supporting repatriation efforts. It seems militia members in these



Photo courtesy of Sister Maria Lourdes

*Sister Maria Lourdes gathering and discussing recollections from a crowd of refugees in Haekesak, West Timor.*

<sup>4</sup> To this day there is some evidence of an Indonesian supported militia army, possibly 10,000 strong, which is training in West Timor for the task of "taking back" East Timor. Individuals claiming to be part of this army have made open promises to invade East Timor the moment the UN Peace-Keeping Force departs.



Photo courtesy of Sister Maria Lourdes

*This camp houses refugees from Oecusse, the district of East Timor isolated on the northern coast of West Timor.*

abuse in the camps by highlighting the case of a 16-year-old girl who was forcibly taken as the third wife of a notorious militia leader.

Numerous other problems plague the refugee situation. The West Timor government accuses the refugees of thievery and being a general drag on local economy. Refugees are chopping local forests for fuelwood at an alarming rate, causing erosion and aggravating the local West Timorese. The refugees have taken over land to farm, some private and some public. Some are concerned about harvesting

camps are becoming desperate; they are being weaned from the breast that sustained them for so long, and are channeling their violent anger towards the refugees.

Our friend, Sister Maria Lourdes, a charismatic East Timorese nun, recently made a trip across the border with three of her trainees. Their association with the Catholic Church eased their entry into several camps. There they assessed the situation, distributed small amounts of aid, and ministered to the refugees.

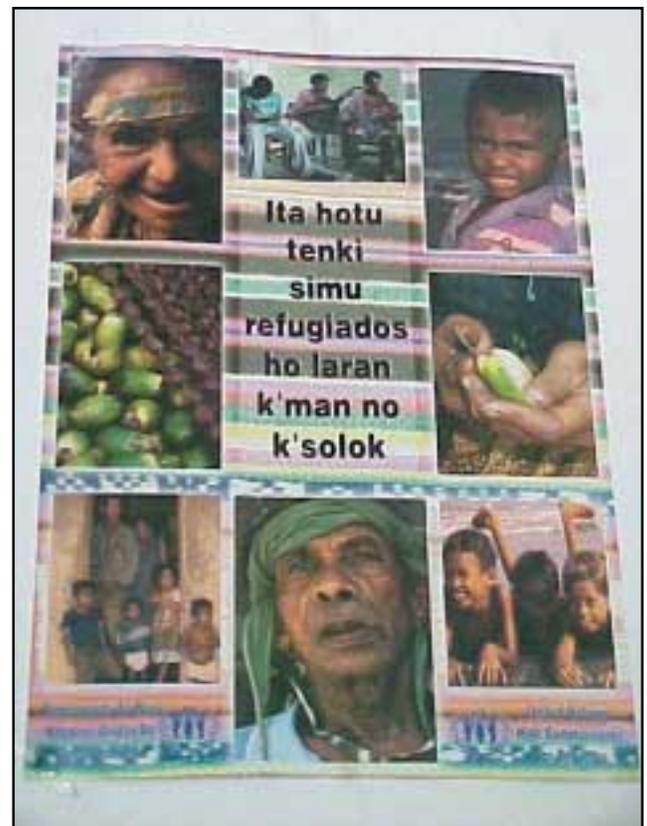
The trip was risky and more than a bit frightening for them. Once, after a meeting in a church, men from the refugee group surrounded one of the Sister's trainees and demanded to know her true purpose. They said they had killed nuns and priests back in East Timor, and they could do it again. The local priest who had arranged Sister Lourdes's visit then spoke up: "You can kill me, then - I'm clergy. These are our guests, and they came to minister to us." Like a scene from the Bible, the angry group slowly dispersed.

Sister Lourdes said it was apparent that the militia had the refugees living in fear for their lives. Many of the camps are physically constructed so that militia leaders can monitor all activities of the refugees. There are cases of common refugees having to perform work for the militia leaders, who also control food and other resources.

Child abuse and sexual slavery are frequent in the camps as well. On May 14<sup>th</sup>, a 15-year-old girl was rescued after 18 months of sexual abuse at the hands of a militia leader and his wife. In a higher-profile case, Kirsty Sword Gusmao, wife of Xanana Gusmao, *defacto* leader of East Timor, recently called on the United Nations Human Rights Commission to address the problem of sexual

their crops and how to transport the yield back to East Timor.

Due to the rampant propaganda put out by militia, good information is scarce in the camps. According to Sister Lourdes and others, the refugees are unsure of the situation at present in East Timor, and whether they



*"We need to receive the refugees with kindness and happiness." So reads a poster in the campaign to avoid violence around the returning refugees.*

would be welcomed back to East Timor or not. A UN delegation traveled to several of the camps in April of this year, led by the West Timor provincial military commander, to remedy this problem. The delegation distributed much information and delivered an Easter message of reconciliation from the two bishops of East Timor, urging the refugees to return home. Bishop Basilio Nascimento from Baucau, East Timor is planning a trip to the camps as well.

Some of the refugees are rightly afraid of going back because they were involved in the violence of 1999. Persons who committed crimes will be called to stand trial and could presumably be subject to vigilante justice in the interim. In an attempt to avoid this violence, the UN and local nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) are carrying out a massive campaign in East Timor promoting the peaceful return of refugees. Glossy posters grace the walls of many local businesses and public spaces imploring the peaceful reception of refugees. Though crimes of 1999 are being prosecuted by the fledgling court system, both Church and State are urging East Timorese to make amends and start anew. A proposal for a National Commission for Truth, Reception and Reconciliation is being debated. The Commission would work to document and seek alternative sentencing for cases



Photo: Sister Maria Lourdes  
*UNHCR tarps are used to make temporary meeting places for the refugees in Labur, West Timor.*

that would not fall into a "serious crimes" category.

The campaign for reconciliation has been largely successful. The cases of violence against returnees have been extremely few. My friends in Maliana said that militia members that have returned have been very meek and obedient. (There is such a formidable UN police and military presence in East Timor that it is hard to imagine any militia acting belligerent after returning.)

I have interviewed returnees from several different districts. All said they encountered no trouble at all at the border. Once the border was reached and their names were put on a list of returnees, their problems were behind them. The local transitional government offices, UNHCR, and several NGO's (including JRS, IOM – International Organization for Migration, CARE, and World Vision) provided food, shelter, building supplies and counseling to help them in their transition back to life in East Timor. To a person, they were all extremely pleased to be back, and many wished they had made the move earlier.



Photo: Sister Maria Lourdes  
*An East Timorese family and their borrowed home in Haekesak, West Timor.*

On the other hand, many said they risked their lives and property just getting to the border. All said they could not discuss freely the option



Photo: Sister Maria Lourdes

*An extended group of refugees in front of their makeshift homes in a camp near Labur, West Timor*

of returning lest the militia hear of their plans and punish them. Many left crops, livestock, and personal belongings behind in their dash for freedom.

It seems, then, that the solution to this problem in all its ugly, snarled complexity can be reduced to a single action, a single requirement, as of yet unfulfilled: to disarm and disband the militias of West Timor. Solidarity organizations and the majority of East Timorese, of course, have been chanting this mantra since long before the referendum. And the only entity capable of carrying out this action is that which set up the militias: the Indonesian military.

The central Indonesian government, which has officially accepted the independence of East Timor, has agreed time and time again to disarm and disband the militias operating in West Timor. Even if one assumes this promise to be honest and good-willed, the fact remains that the Indonesian military is a complex and multifaceted organism, with its many tentacles operating somewhat autonomously. East Timor was a golden calf for the Indonesian military units involved: export of marble, cloves, coffee, hardwoods and other crops netted hundreds of millions of dollars to the military-controlled monopolies that exploited East Timor for 24 years.<sup>5</sup> And it is hard to let go of a golden calf. The factions of Indonesian military that were involved in East Timor are still licking their wounds from such a monumental loss, and it is quite possible that some of them maintain dreams of retaking East Timor. They are definitely not interested

in a quick, clean solution to the problem.

So, who controls the Indonesian military? Some would say that question is akin to, "What happens when you die?" The shadowy world of Indonesian political power structure is not something one can learn about in an encyclopedia. However, one variable in the equation stands out unambiguously: the influence of the United States and its military.

The U.S. is unquestionably the most powerful foreign influence in Jakarta and has been for half a century. U.S.-based corporations gain billions of dollars yearly from the exploitation of Indonesia's plentiful cheap labor and rich natural resources, and with the (although scanty) taxes and wages they pay in this process, provide considerable support for Indonesia's economy.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the U.S. military-industrial complex once made enormous profits selling various killing machines, as well as trainings of questionable variety, to the military of Indonesia, and still salivates at the prospect of such a lucrative market opening again in the future. Much of the actual cash paid for these goods and services came from the U.S. public, since much of dealing was done as "aid." The Indonesian military is always more than happy to accept such aid.

The only catch to this obscene gravy train is the ongoing, widespread, flagrant, human-rights abuses of the

<sup>5</sup> See John Taylor, *East Timor, the Price of Freedom* (New York, Zed Books, 1999) p.125

<sup>6</sup> See <http://acehnet.tripod.com/mobil2.htm> (Wall Street Journal, September 7, 2000) on Mobil Oil Company, and <http://www.fcx.com/mr/fast-facts/ff-econimpact.htm> (fact sheet) on PT Freeport Indonesia. These two U.S. based corporations are among the largest in Indonesia. Both have operations located in the heart of regions plagued with human-rights violations, and both employ Indonesian armed forces to quell local resistance to their operations. For more information see <http://acehnet.tripod.com/mobil.htm> and <http://www.moles.org/ProjectUnderground/motherlode/freeport/tenrisks.html>

Indonesian military. Human rights organizations from around the globe have documented the abuse. Photos have been published of torture in progress. Mass graves are being uncovered to this day in East Timor. Tens of thousands of witnesses from across the Indonesian archipelago — Aceh, Ambon, Kalimantan, Irian Jaya — bear testimony to the unimaginable cruelty of the Indonesian military. No one doubts it: I've never met a non-believer, Indonesian or otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

Despite being presented with this undeniable evidence, the U.S. government (with plenty of coaching from the pro-Indonesia lobby) found excuses to keep up extraordinary levels of military aid until 1999, and to merely advise the government and military of Indonesia to be good. Finally, as the destruction of East Timor came before the world's eyes in 1999, the Pentagon was forced by an outcry among U.S. citizens to shut off all military aid to Indonesia.

Yet, like a Pusher in a dark alley, the U.S. is offering \$200,000 dollars of "military training" to Indonesia in 2001. In March, the proposed budget for 2002 came out, with this column increased to \$400,000. That was only *six months* after the killing of a U.S. citizen on Indonesian soil by militia with clear support of the Indonesian military.<sup>8</sup> In May the U.S. began joint naval-training exercises with the Indonesian military, only 400

miles from Aceh, where Indonesian armed forces have killed or caused the disappearance of thousands of civilians.

Father Raper of JRS states the situation with stark clarity: "The killings of the UNHCR workers were a consequence of inaction on the part of the Indonesian military. The allies of Indonesia can help by direct contact with the Indonesian government or its military, imploring them to take ... control (of the militias). It is important that justice be done and that crimes against humanity be identified."

The U.S., as number-one ally of Indonesia, should use its many connections within the government and military of Indonesia to press hard for the immediate disarming, disbanding, and criminal trial of the militias in West Timor. Not a single dollar of military aid should be released to Indonesia until human rights abuses stop in West Timor and across the Archipelago. International human-rights tribunals should be set up to try Indonesian military officers for crimes against humanity committed in East and West Timor, as well as in other locations.

U.S. citizens have a large amount of power to resolve this situation, and we should use it. See <http://www.etan.org/action/urgntMnu.htm> for details on how you can help. □

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.gn.apc.org/tapol/archiveframes.htm>

<sup>8</sup> The militia suspects from the September UNHCR massacre recently received their sentences in a court in Jakarta: 10 to 20 months in prison.

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Phone: (603) 643-5548

E-Mail: [ICWA@valley.net](mailto:ICWA@valley.net)

Fax: (603) 643-9599

Web Site: [www.icwa.org](http://www.icwa.org)

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin

Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson

Publications: Ellen Kozak

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