

## **Timor Leste 3 years after independence**

Written by Dom Kihara-Hunt, December 2005

I returned to Timor Leste after having been away for 3 years. This article is about the changes as I perceived them.

Timor Leste is the newest country in the world, and as an officially recognised and fully independent country, is only 3 years old. Their struggle to independence was widely reported at the time. 25 years of strife and warfare occurred against Indonesia, who took the territory from an 'independent' East Timor in 1975. It culminated in 1999 with the popular consultation with the East Timorese over whether East Timor should be granted autonomy within Indonesia, or full independence. Independence was overwhelmingly chosen, and this decision led to a rampage of killing, looting and destruction that left much of the country in ruins.

INTERFET (international Force for East Timor), led by Australia, intervened and put a stop to the chaos, and then UNTAET, UN Transitional Administration in East Timor) ran the country for the next two and a half years, until full independence was granted. UNTAET set up ETTA (East Timor Transitory Administration) that became ETPA (East Timor Public Administration), and then ETA (East Timor Administration) that then became the government.

I worked in ETTA / ETPA / ETA as a member of the Forestry Unit, which became the forestry division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. At the time we had 25 staff members and were trying to stop people logging (UNTAET had placed a moratorium on cutting more than 3 trees per family, and a ban on sale of timber), introduce agroforestry, manage the national parks and work with communities on watershed management. During the Indonesian regime the forestry department had over 200 staff.

My wife has a longer history with East Timor, as she witnessed in person the atrocities carried out in 1999, as she was a member of the UNAMET election team that administered the popular consultation. She was back in late 1999 working in Oecussi, and after a few months became the human rights officer in Liquica district, which is where we lived.

After a frustrating 18 months of trying to deal with the UNTAET administration, we left for other places and dreams, but by then had also fallen deeply in love with East Timor, the culture, the climate, the people and the places. We had made many deep personal friendships with local people, and spoke one of the local languages, Tetun, very well.

That was in early 2002, and in mid 2005 we went back. The first and most noticeable change was that there is a 'system' where there was none before. You have to buy a visa now at the airport (before, an ID was enough) but there casualness of East Timor still prevails: I did not have enough USD for the visa, but I could walk through passport control and customs to where my wife was waiting for me in order to get some more money to be allowed in officially. An acquaintance of ours also didn't have the right money, so they just waived her fee!

The country's currency is the US dollar, but recently they have been making some Timorese coins (only cents or 'centivos' as they are called). The official language is Portuguese, even though much of the population do not speak it; the politicians that made the decision were educated in Portugal.

Dili roads have completely changed, because somebody has dreamed up an illogical one-way system, which forces you to circumnavigate the city even for short trips. Luckily, however, taxis are common and well regulated: 1USD buys you a trip of any length in the city, with no negotiation necessary.

Other governmental systems seem to be working, such as customs, vehicle licensing, and the police. In fact, there are so many police it is a wonder how the government can afford them. They seem to have taken the role of the army too (even though there is a defence force in East Timor, the people who administer the border with Indonesia are the police). There are traffic police, who have road blocks, then there are normal police, who have road blocks, then there is the rapid intervention force, who have road blocks, then there are the immigration police, who would have road blocks if they could... they are, apparently, heavy handed, and will arrest people for breaking the law, which goes as far as drunken brawling. The crime rate is low, but I got the sense that people worry about their loss of freedom.

Bureaucracy is, unfortunately, well advanced. One assumes that the Timorese were well taught to be obstructionist by the Indonesian example, which is perfectly designed to extract as much in bribes from their 'customers' as possible. Is East Timor going this way too? We did not see any outright examples of bribery, but certainly felt that our own efforts at getting things done could have been expedited by a few well placed dollars. One opinion is that East Timorese are waiting for the present UN mission, UNOTIL (United Nations Office of Timor Leste), to close, before they can operate as they wish without being monitored.

Dili is 'growing up' too, with more English speakers, internet cafes, and commodities in the hops that are available for the local people, although things are really expensive too. Gone is the friendliness and gratitude the Timorese used to show towards foreigners, and children don't follow you shouting "Hello Mister"

any more.

Out in the countryside, though, things have not changed at all. Buildings that were destroyed in 1999 and not rebuilt by the time we left, are still destroyed. The same holes are in the same roads. There is a timeless quality to the place. Our friends who work have moved on, getting better jobs, getting married, travelling abroad, but those who were not working in the districts have not been able to move on – there is almost no economy outside of Dili. I realised that although there are many more commodities available in Dili, they are only there for the city folk, the well-off and the foreigners.

It is like there are 2 economies operating – the one for the well-off being too expensive for the average Timorese, and stocked mainly with imported items (they even import chillies into Timor, despite almost every single family grows chillies); and the ‘local economy’ for the rest of the population which is virtually at a standstill for the lack of buying power of the population. Much of the population are surviving at a subsistence level, and doing some barter. Farmers are replacing coffee plantations with corn fields as they cannot get enough money to survive from the coffee. According to the office for organic coffee growing in the Department of Forestry, demand for Timorese organic coffee is high, but production is not keeping up.

Hunger is still a real issue for some people during the hungry months (between planting and harvest, when last year’s food is depleted and this years’ is not ready). According to Ego Lemos, chief of HASATIL (Hametin Sustentabilidade Agrikultura Timor Lorosae - Strengthen Sustainable Agriculture in Timor-Leste), East Timorese have moved away from their traditional food sources which include many root crops such as cassava, taro, sweet potato and yam, as well as corn and mountain rice, and become dependent on irrigated white rice as is found in many places in South East Asia. He believes this is a direct result of Indonesian policy, and now, when people are asked if they have enough food, they may say no, not because they are hungry but because they lack rice. East Timor has very few places suitable for irrigated rice. The food security challenge is therefore to return to traditional crops more suited to the hilly nature of East Timor, and to improve the very poor soil.

The Ministry of Agriculture is just starting to realise that a focus on cash crops for export is not helping the bulk of the population, and that a focus on food security needs to happen first, before East Timor can start to export. Timor does need foreign investment though, as their oil is not enough to keep their antique roads maintained, as well as run the schools, health centres and government structures. There are not enough businesses in Dili to provide significant revenues in taxes, but the government knows this and the tax levels are high. The investment

environment is not encouraging to investors: land ownership is insecure, and leases can be revoked by the government with no warning (as happened while we were there to a hotel). It strikes me that East Timor is doing itself a disservice by not being more active in encouraging and assisting foreign investment, with the appropriate systems in place to ensure that local people are employed fairly, trained and so on.

All these problems anger Timorese people, who were so excited to get independence, but who now see that things have not really changed. Nobody would turn back the clock though: there is no doubt among the Timorese that independence is worth the struggle. Many people in Dili say they will not vote for Fretelin (the ruling political party) in the next elections. Out in the countryside, though, people will almost certainly vote Fretelin, as that was the party most involved in the independence movement. Memories are too fresh for people to forget, to drop their allegiance.

Politics remain a key issue in Dili, and the prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, is a deeply unpopular man. However, the president, Xanana Gusmao, is still very popular, almost revered. Are they doing a double act, a good cop bad cop? Someone needs to make tough and unpopular decisions – Mari, and someone need to hold the country together – Xanana.