

The UN Farce: East Timor at the turn of the Millenium

Written by Dom Kihara-Hunt, January 2000

Dili is a strange place. It is a mix of buildings that seem relatively intact, have roofs and walls, and although they often have smoke stains on the walls, and heaps of graffiti (things like F**k off UN, Indonesians are killing us, and so on), there are some signs of a return to normal life. Vegetables are being sold, the market is teeming with people crowded into the ruins of the old market place, there are motorbike mechanic stops on the side of the roads, there are even a couple of restaurants open, although the menus are very limited. All this mixed in with full-on destruction of commercial outlets, houses etc... Power and water are back on, and life seems like it is going again. Before the referendum, in the climate of fear that the East Timorese people have been living with for so long, you would never have seen people out on the streets after dark, or playing football in the park, but now these things are becoming part of the fabric of normal life.

The security may be an illusion though, and you are constantly reminded of the fact by the enormous number of military people there, all bristling with guns, tanks thundering by, sand bag emplacements on strategic corners... in many ways an overkill. What will the situation be like when the Interfet troops and the UN follow-up troops pull out?

The people though are great, There are some angry faces in the crowd, now they realise how awful the UN is and what they have let themselves in for, but on the whole they are welcoming and cheerful, all calling out *Bon Dia*, *Botardes* or *Bonoite*, or increasingly Hello Mista!! They were building nativity sets on the side of the roads, preparing for their Christmas church marathon... seriously devout Catholics.

All of this was mixed in with the UN presence, impossible to ignore. Three out of four cars are UN cars, NGO cars or military cars. Most of them have the windows tightly rolled up and the AC on. The UN staff sleep in a barge / ship, with AC rooms, cut off from the Timorese reality by high fences and security guards. The street by the gangplank to the ship is packed with parked UN vehicles, but that is nothing to the number of cars sitting unused in the UNTAET HQ, mechanics yard or other UN offices. It would seem that every large ego in Dili (and there are many) requires the sole use of a car. This is at the expense of the regions, who, typically, have insufficient vehicles and support, but who are in most need of them.

UN offices are strange too. They are too cold from the AC, are full of computers, photocopiers and bureaucrats looking important. The paper war is in full swing already. Do they realise there is a world out there? One person, English, said that he didn't know how hot East Timor is, he hadn't yet been out of the AC apart from to go from the office to the car (all of 5 meters).

UN staff get a huge salary, that we all know, but compare this. Timorese interpreters, at the top of the UN local staff hierarchy, get \$7 (US) per day. This is paid in US dollars, but the markets take Indonesian rupiah or Australian dollars. They work next to UN staff who, on top of their salaries, get \$109 per day in living allowances alone. The local staff who work in the provinces away from their families get the same money as those who work where their homes are, and of course have to spend some of their money on food and accommodation. The small amount that remains has to go to their families and to rebuilding their homes. How are they expected to feel?

The Timorese are starting to learn that they have merely traded one type of colonialism and exploitation with another. This present form may not torture and kill, but it certainly does not hand over power to those that have sought independence for the last 25 years plus, only to have it removed from them when they thought they had it. UNTAET has taken control. They are the government. They say they will be until the Timorese people are ready to govern themselves, but you can bet the Timorese people will not be the people that decide that. The country is being run by people that have received no training in local language or culture. They are ignorant of the situation so they assess it. Again and again. Everybody does the same assessing. Do they share the knowledge? Do they coordinate and communicate? Where does all the money that tax payers donate to the UN go? To the fat-cat salaries, fancy cars, flashy computers and AC electricity bills of the westerners who are busily helping a lovely kind culture transform into greed, materialism and corruption.

I should try to find some good points to say about the UN, but that is much harder. The return of peace is one, but I'd rather give the credit to the Interfet troops who did the hard work. The UN don't deserve it. The UN are trying to administer (contracted out to the likes of the NT government) the return of services, power, water, shelter, etc. Too little and too late in many cases, but the little that has happened is good. Credit goes much more to the NGOs, WFP and UNHCR who did most of the real work. Setting up a police force is a good thing, but they enforce speeding regulations and do the beat, and try to fit in investigations into the perpetrators of the 50 people found in this mass grave, or the 5 bodies down that well, but no resources, specialists or (apparently) any caring by the administration in Dili makes their jobs as hard as everybody else's. Maybe the best work that UNTAET is doing is liaising with the Indonesian troops (TNI) over the border. The people doing this are known as UNMOs - UN Military observers, who get on well with the TNI, probably because beer, cigarettes, food and other commodities are easier to find in West Timor than East.

Take Oecussi as an example of the situation of the rural areas. UN have failed to provide sufficient anything to the UN staff there. There are 2 cars for the civil officers. The boss gets one to satisfy his ego (literally, he claims that he needs one because he is the District Administrator (DA) and so must look the part), and so the other 4 civil officers have one car to share. Add to that these points: there are loads of unused cars in Dili, the cars were a free donation from the Japanese government, the cars lack recovery gear of any kind (spare tubes, patches, high-lift jacks or winches). 12 UNMOs have to share 4 of them and 10 police have 2. All those people have just 2 satellite phones. One is in the bush and so just one remains in town for the use of all those people - so no-one gets the chance to use it much. No wonder the NGOs feel they need to help the UN staff out.

This situation of the Oecussi UN does not stop with logistics. The staff are another thing again. The DA is a Japanese guy who has lived in Indonesia for 7 years, Cambodia for three, and is supposedly a highly experienced person, but appearances deceive. I don't think he understands the political situation there, or how the people feel about things: either that or he is simply a 'dodgy' guy. He openly is pro-Indonesian, regularly going across the border to eat dinner with the TNI commander and district chiefs in neighboring West Timor, generally talks with pro-autonomy people (who were generally militia), and even decided to allow Indonesians who used to live in Oecussi register their land - before allowing the East Timorese to have their say first. This is particularly important as much of the Indonesian owned land was seized in the occupation, so it would not be right of the UN to acknowledge their rights to that land. The East Timorese must be asked first. If

they say that Indonesians fairly bought land that's one thing, but if they say it was taken by force that's another. However, they should be asked first, not the other way round!! On top of all that, he is a hopeless people manager, cannot coordinate anything, doesn't tell anyone anything he does, gets all defensive when you ask, and has completely failed to get anything going in Oecussi. All that and he has dared call himself Bupati - governor - of Oecussi. Many complaints have gone in but the UN acts slowly, and it will take a few months to get rid of him. In the mean time, how much damage can he cause?

The hospital, three weeks ago, had no roof, overflowing long drops, charred timbers and no supplies, running water or anything. Since then Interfet and Navy troops stationed in the HMAS Newcastle off-shore have been fixing it up with the limited supplies that have. They are badly in need of corrugated iron and plywood for the roof. At the moment they are making do with scavenged stuff and tarpaulins, but it is obviously insufficient. The hospital is currently run by 2 Aussie nurses from International Medical Corps (unpaid volunteers - another admin balls up), the Navy doctor, one French doctor from Medecins du Monde, and three Timorese nurses, the only ones in the enclave. They see about 200 cases daily, half of which is malaria. The other half generally consist of stomach bugs, TB, dengue, or machete wounds. There is no testing or medical equipment other than what the westerners could carry in their bags, and drugs are limited. Still, it's operating and that's pretty amazing.

The generator is surprisingly intact, needing a starter motor to kick one of the generators for the town supply off... but of course no-one has one of them, and getting one is not as easy as ringing up the supplier and getting one flown in!! Of course getting the generator up is the first step but after that bulbs, wires, meters, boxes, fuses, spares, diesel, etc etc etc...

The school is as all schools in Oecussi, probably in Timor - roofless. The beams are still there in most of them but the corrugated iron and plywood ceilings are now in West Timor along with everything else that used to be in Oecussi town and could be moved. The teachers were Indonesians (as were the government officials, police, military, doctors, nurses, and any other official position you care to think of) and so are now gone. Timorese teachers are scarce but in places do exist, and in some places new ones have already volunteered. Most schools are operating – school days for children last for a maximum of 2 hours, under the nearest mango tree, but with no books, pens, or materials of any kind the best they can do is a bit of oral language tuition in Tetun and Portuguese.

Corrugated iron, timber, plywood and tools are the most needed commodities in Oecussi, and probably most of East Timor. Has there been a shipment of these items anywhere in East Timor?