

East Timor in the wet, an experience to remember. I have been back from Dili for nearly 2 weeks. The first week was spent in a blur of high fever and aching joints as I convalesced in Darwin Hospital, another victim of Dengue Fever. This week has been one of rest and recuperation, slowly regaining strength.

Dengue has taken a high toll of Australians working in Timor. The Doctor I consulted in the 'Dili Clinic' of Darwin Hospital says there is evidence of a pandemic, the hospital has treated 100 patients since the wet began. I had advance warning of the onset of the illness in the form of a low-level headache for nearly a week before the symptoms intensified. I had delivered the aid and the truck and visited a number of rural locations where Sister Lourdes has houses for members of her institute and homeless children. People were dropping like flies from Dengue and I guessed, correctly, that my turn was coming around so I booked a plane out of Timor for the luxury of a Darwin sick bed.

Three weeks earlier I had stood at the entrance to Dili Airport, the plane having finally found enough visibility to duck down to ground. Another 'go round' and we would have been back to Darwin. Waiting for a ride to the Caritas compound, (Caritas a Catholic relief agency had taken me under its wing and provided transportation for both the truck and myself to Dili) I took in the sights and sounds around me. Lots of soldiers and officials of all descriptions and a great deal of chaotic shepherding of cars attempting to pick up or disgorge passengers. A phalanx of Portuguese soldiers marched towards the terminal entrance, forming a corridor from the terminal doors, weapons at the ready facing the crowd, something about refugees returning from Indonesia.

At the Caritas compound, I was warmly greeted by the staff and later in the evening went on to dig at a guesthouse run by members of Sister Lourdes' Institute in the suburb of Prunus.

Sister Lourdes or Mana Lu (sister Lu) as she is more commonly known is a charismatic woman in her mid thirties. A dynamo of energy she is constantly on the move, visiting her various outposts or being consulted by the emerging political leadership in Free Timor. Just recently Xanana Gusmao has asked her to be a member of a special commission overseeing the reconciliation process between those who supported Indonesian colonialism and those who paid the price for opposing it. Not an easy task to diffuse hatreds based on the spilling of blood and in many cases split family loyalties. One gets the feeling that Xanana has chosen well for Sister Lourdes is becoming a highly respected leader of her society. One also quite clearly gets the sense that her influence as a leader is unique for a woman in traditional Timorese society.

The organisation founded by Sister Lourdes is described as being secular and it is in the sense that the membership of her 'Association' is different to the requirements of the traditional religious structures of the Catholic Church. Having served an apprenticeship of 6 years, candidates become eligible for full membership on the recommendation of Sister Lourdes to the Bishops. To be accepted a member takes vows of solidarity, fraternity, poverty, and chastity. The contract is for 5 years and after a period of renewals can be made 'perpetual'.

The order is quite small, in some ways its size seems quite disproportionate to the influence Sister Lourdes has obtained. My memory is that Mana Lu told me there are currently 18 members of the order and a growing number of 'candidates' in training.

Quite clearly Sister Lourdes is planting seeds towards a large, vibrant and ongoing organisation which in my opinion will assume a major role in the delivery of services to the poor. The operation is very much based on Sister Lourdes controlling the organisation in considerable detail. There are no ranks inside the organisation and my observations are of Mana Lu directly overseeing the day to day operations of her Institute in great detail. Similarly, there is little evidence of a bureaucracy supporting Sister Lourdes, other than her personal Secretary.

Here is some information relating to the work Sister Lourdes is undertaking. Please don't hold me to the numbers as they are all from my memory. In Dili Mana Lu has a clinic for the poor at the suburb of Colohoun, a run down house with some outhouse buildings being used as a hospice, mainly for Tuberculosis patients. The facilities are very run down and there are problems of cross infection of patients, given the rather primitive conditions. Cooking as in the rest of the locations is carried out using firewood of indifferent burning quality. The last I heard was the Rotary Clubs of Darwin had undertaken to underwrite the most urgent repairs to the Colohoun operation.

A second health clinic operates on the other side of town in the suburb of Bairu Pite, in the time I was in Dili this facility was receiving the finishing touches to major renovations, including a dormitory for patients and their families. New septic facilities have been installed and a high tech water purification plant supplies large quantities of clean water. An American Doctor, Dan Murphy who has been a volunteer in Timor for several years, provides the medical expertise at both Colohoun and Bairu Pite. Seeing his patients waiting in their dozens at any point of the day, leaves no doubt that Dan Murphy is a remarkable man. During the lead up to the independence referendum, militia threatened Dan's life and burned his home to the ground.

The central theme of Mana Lu's work is the religious centre and orphanage at Dare in the hills overlooking Dili. This is where it all began on land owned by her father who still lives in a house close by. The Centre comprises 2 converted farm buildings, one above the other on a steep hillside. The lower building just above the track, which serves as a road for vehicles, is the dormitory for the children. Fifty metres higher up is the chapel, kitchens and dining room and classroom around which most activities take place. This is a special place, quite serene and I am told that Xanana comes here to retreat when he needs to find some measure of peace for reflection.

The younger children, in addition to religious instruction make a 30 minute trek further up the mountain to take classes in traditional school subjects whilst the older girls and young women spend most of their time in religious studies. These are considered future members of the association. The number of children in residence varies as parents seeking temporary relief from being unable to care adequately for their children use the facilities for respite care. When I last visited Dare there were about 35 children in residence.

Sister Lourdes also has outposts at Aileu in the central highlands, and the small towns of Same and Betano on the southern coast, Viquque (South East), Loes and Pollara (phonetic pronunciation - I have not been able to find the name written) in the north west.

Most of these settlements are very small, usually comprising one or two houses. Pallara is the newest settlement having been established in February this year. Typically these houses are staffed by two of the order's members community. None of the communities have electricity or running water. At Pollara there is a wet season spring several kilometers from the settlement

and a permanent spring in the mountains 7 kilometers away. Each day several hours are spent carting containers of water back to the houses.

Mana Lu gratefully received the aid that we collected in Australia. The contents were unpacked and made up into lots to be shared around the various settlements. The truck is stationed at Colohoun and is to be used around Dili. The roads are such, lanes actually, that only the most robust transport is applicable in the countryside. Most roads are strictly four wheel drive territory outside Dili.

There is still a pressing need for a wide range of the necessities of life which Australians take for granted, ranging from toiletries to educational materials, pots and pans, clothing and footwear, towels and linen. In fact most items required for a reasonable if poor life are unavailable or beyond the economic reach of most Timorese. It is imperative that Australians continue with their commitment towards providing physical relief while longer- term solutions to poverty are found and implemented. Having said that, there is a real dilemma to be faced in how we can channel goods to Timor without incurring freight costs that are so prohibitive as to make the delivery of aid in kind uneconomic. Because of the large distance to cross the Australian continent, freight is expensive.

There does appear to be just about enough food for people to get by on, although it is noticeable that the children of Dili are not receiving enough protein and show symptoms of vitamin deficiency. My limited touring of the country appeared to demonstrate that children out of the city are in better shape. In the space of three weeks I was also able to note discernible progress in rebuilding basic houses. Groups of people are cleaning the public places of Dili in return for UN food rations.

The Timorese lack capital to undertake major construction or business development and I am told that obtaining venture capital for Timor is virtually impossible as no financial institution will underwrite the risk. One of the principal inhibitors is the uncertainty about land title. One source told me that at the time of liberation, Interfet soldiers discovered Timorese burning Title Deeds housed in a central registry. Sorting out property ownership and dealing with property of exiled militia will take time and patience.

Someone said that Dili is not Timor. While that is true and much of Timor is encapsulated in the countryside, Dili is Timor in the present situation. The succession of colonisers and now the United Nations as governors are effecting change in ways that cannot be anticipated. For example, the introduction of some paid work by the NGOs and UNTAET has the capacity to distort the local economy. While some Australians agonise about the seeming injustice of the NGOs paying as little as \$4 Australian a day to Timorese employees, I met a coffee plantation owner who has a crop ready to pick and cannot obtain labour as the traditional pay rates have been undermined by the distortion of the aid economy in Dili. It is not an easy problem to work through, however, it is of paramount importance that the Timorese gain control of their economic future and find their own methods of wealth distribution. To my mind, the sooner the UN is out of Timor the better. Whilst the UN presence has been necessary the mere presence of so many wealthy foreigners has the capacity to seriously distort Timorese society. It is in the same vein that I believe we should exercise a great deal of caution in offering the Timorese advice based on Australian perceptions of equity.

I remember one interesting conversation with Sister Lourdes who said that under the Javanese colonialists the Timorese people had become lazy. She

said that the Timorese had been transformed into service workers on the periphery of an economy ruthlessly directed towards the theft of Timor's wealth. Sister Lourdes believes that the process of rebuilding must be based on a renewed agrarian sector. The Timorese have always had a special association with the land and that is another reason why there is cause for concern at the changes taking place in Dili. There would appear to be a very real chance that Timor will experience a breakdown in the relationship to the land and that many rural dwellers will move to Dili to become shanty town dwellers.

I have held discussions with a number of expatriate Australians who have been in Timor for some time, including an Australian Police Officer serving with CIVPOL. The officer remarked how quickly peaceful situations can become ugly and violent. Theft is on the increase and so is random violence. It would not be appropriate for foreigners to venture forth on foot at night in the city. Immediately after the Indonesian sponsored blood letting there was a real sense of camaraderie as people survived as best they could. Now with redevelopment proceeding, the gap between the have and the have-nots is widening and producing strong social tensions.

Most foreigners see Dili through the heavily tinted windscreens of expensive four wheel drive cars. Because of my lack of association with any agency, I had to walk everywhere during the day and must say that I received nothing I could perceive as anything other than warmth and courtesy from Timorese in the streets. The back street house I stayed in was at the end of a row of burned out houses, I am told they were homes of Javanese who fled back to Indonesia when it became clear the Timorese were determined to have their freedom.

The house was on the flight path for the UN helicopters and so I became accustomed to the noise. One morning at 5am, however, the din was extra loud and eventually I dragged myself out of bed and wandered to the front door. Out in the street was a whirlwind of dust and rubbish thrown up by rotor blades as a helicopter hovered almost directly over the house, at about 40 or 50 feet. Timorese in the street also appeared to watch. Minutes later a squad of Portuguese troops ran around the corner, guns at the ready and ordered us back inside. Reportedly they were searching for militia believed to be in the area. The Portuguese soldiers don't appear to have a very people friendly wave and have according to some accounts been handing out rough justice. Perhaps an echo of the colonial past?

And then days before I left Timor I stayed in a house where 2 militia were being provided with sanctuary and I did not feel unsafe. Difficult things, civil wars where the good guys don't wear white and the bad guys are not all in black. Who can say with absolute certainty what they would have done if induced or coerced into being part of the militia? Reconciliation is going to be a tortuous path, but the price of failure will mean years and years of ongoing upheaval and very likely a guerilla war waged from the camps in West Timor.

What of the future of Australian aid to Timor from the Canberra Region? For myself there is the question of whether or not Community First is to continue as an ongoing organisation. Is there a need in the ACT for our type of support activities not undertaken by other agencies and are those who have supported the project till now prepared to formally participate in formulating further plans and carry them out? I suspect that there is still valuable work to do if sufficient people have been touched by the project till now and are willing to continue.

I have returned with some ideas. Perhaps it is audacious of me to suggest

it, but what about moving to have Dili and Canberra twinned as Sister Cities? The capital city of Australia in alliance with the emergent capital of a new and worthy neighbour.

In practical aid terms, freight difficulties aside, we are well placed to help with educational assistance, government lobbying and provision of computers for emerging educational needs. If we work the details through there is probably a lot more quality clothing, footwear, linen and other items to be collected sorted and freighted. In terms of computers I have in mind machines of the obsolete 486 variety and later, loaded with software. We could easily accumulate 5 - 10 such machines, network them, test them and supply a range of spare parts for ongoing relevance. In Timor at present, 10 such machines would be a significant resource for many educational organisations. In the course of the last few months we have developed some productive links with the trade unions and I am sure that further joint ventures are both possible and desirable.

Sister Lourdes has other immediate needs. I have been asked to obtain a socket set to assist in maintaining the 2 vehicles currently used by the Institute. The motor bike ridden by Mana Lu's Secretary badly needs a new chain and sprocket along with a set of tyres. And one member of her Institute harbors a hope of obtaining a video camera so that he can start recording the work of Mana Lu, for the education of future members of the Institute. In Pollara the people need a poly pipe laid to the mountain spring so the village has permanent drinking water. Imagine the changes in people's ability to socialise and learn if they do not have to cart bottles of water 7 kms each day. These things are indicative of the work to be done if we have a will to do so.

To finish this report, together we have achieved something out of the ordinary. Based on the commitment of a few individuals and some strategic alliances we have managed to collect several thousand kilos of valuable aid materials and ensure the distribution of it to some of the neediest people in Timor. We have donated a truck in working order with sufficient spares to keep it going for some years. Not bad, take a big pat on the back.

The concept of Community First is not just about assisting Timor, it is founded on a philosophy of undertaking discussion, analysis and action aimed at strengthening our own community values and activities. It is about juxtaposing the benefits of connected communal life, a concern for positive outcomes in life for all against the 'values' of the markets. It is the aim of Community First to develop the prominence of community needs in a world obsessed with market outcomes.

Please consider whether or not your busy lives will allow you to contribute to bedding down "Community First" as an ongoing project, working both in our local communities and building links to other communities like East Timor.

There is great potential for enabling more good things to emerge both in giving a helping hand in Timor and showing support for our own community in dealing with the social issues lost in the age of market economy.

I sincerely hope that through this positive empowering experience, run on a shoestring, that we can work together in the future. As the songwriter says, 'It's not a bad world, just badly organised'.

Peter O'Dea
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Community First
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