

Where to start. Perhaps in the reality of being in Dili, capital of East Timor on a steamy Saturday afternoon. I am sorry that it has been so long since I communicated with you, but the further north I have travelled the more difficult it has become to keep the communication lines open. I am writing to you now, courtesy of the Australian Trade Union movement international aid arm, APHEDA. But then it is like that here, people have to help each other, its like everyone has a piece of a jigsaw puzzle and you cannot build with your piece alone.

Timor Aid did not send my report. I had sent a message to Canberra to alert my family to the transmission and in the event of it not being received you were forwarded an old report by a well meaning young helper. I apologise for that inconvenience. What I wanted to say in that report was that I had an eventful time travelling to Darwin. It took me nearly 4 weeks. The trip started well enough, left Canberra in Sunday February 6 as planned and journeyed that day to Bairnsdale to load school supplies collected by the students and teachers of the Bairnsdale Secondary College. The next day on to Melbourne to pick up more materials and a Timorese passenger returning to Timor for the first time in 25 years. Loaded up, my passenger only knew how to find the road to Adelaide by travelling via the centre of the city. And as Murphy would understand, the truck took this as its cue to misbehave. The engine became noisy and it wanted to stall at every traffic light. It also took a lot of coaxing to get going. The day was hot and with the engine in the cab the temperature must have been in the upper forties. Still we soldiered on as far as Horsham where we stopped to make some repairs because the noise was deafening by this stage. Using my entire mechanical prowess I refitted the muffler box which was leaking in addition to the obvious loss of a gasket closer to the engine. Off again in the gathering dusk. A short time later the muffler box fell off completely. Decided to continue through the night to Adelaide where repairs would be easier to obtain. To keep our sanity we stuffed paper in our ears, and to cope with the intense heat from the engine, wound the windows down with our shared window winder and wrapped T shirts around our heads to ameliorate the wind. We arrived in Adelaide at 3 am on Tuesday February 8 having miraculously been ignored by at least 2 police cars.

Hasty repairs costing \$700 and some impassioned fund raising to meet the cost. Some old friends to the rescue and by Wednesday afternoon we were ready to hit the road again. Having left Adelaide we parked in a sparse shade and waited for the searing sun to set. Next we drove all night through Port Augusta and on to Glendambo. Next stop Marla Bore where we needed to have the fuel filters changed - somewhere we picked up contaminated fuel. From Marla Bore across the Northern Territory border.

At that point our luck ran out as the road north was closed, covered by floodwaters, the like of which had not been seen for years. Despair, our transport to East Timor left Darwin, the navy transport HMAS Jervis Bay was loading on Saturday and by now it was Thursday. The rain continued to fall and it became clear that we were fighting a losing battle. My Timorese companion caught a bus back to Adelaide and flew from there to Dili. I waited another 2 days and then decided to lock the truck and hitch hike back to Adelaide, by now some 1,500-km south. I spent nearly 2 weeks waiting for the road to open and caught a Greyhound back to Kulgera to find the truck intact but the Gerry cans of petrol stolen along with my tent which I had used to billet some stranded women and children. I won't bore you with the detail of the rest of the journey except to say it was a little trying, a condition added to by travelling alone. On to Darwin on a Wednesday, the floodwaters closing the road behind me the following day around Catherine.

With no transport for our aid to Dili I started the rounds of organizations I thought might help. I considered the radio stations and a public appeal. I tried not to get depressed and to stay focused on the job. My persistence paid off with a generous offer from Caritas Australia to take the truck across. I was truly bowled over when I was told that I deserved to hand the truck keys to Sister Lourdes and would be provided with an air fare.

There you have my journey. I arrived in Dili and met the barge carrying the truck. After collecting it at the docks I drove it to the tuberculosis clinic sister Lourdes runs in the suburb of Colohoun. Last night I stayed in the orphanage and school run by Sister Lourdes. I have also travelled to Aileu, the location of another project of Sister Lourdes and currently a contonment area for Falintil, the East Timorese resistance army that helped keep the spark of freedom alight in the dark days of Indonesian Occupation.

I have seen and heard a great deal in my one-week plus stay. I have a lot to tell you about the realities here, I will stay another few weeks to learn more about the realities and what Australians can do to help and then home for Easter. To each and every one of you who believes in the concept of 'Community First' and particularly to all those kind souls and organizations which have put me here, 'thank you' one and all.

Best wishes,  
Peter O'Dea,  
Convenor,  
Community First.