

ASYLUM SEEKERS TO EAST TIMOR ?

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Australia-East Timor relations:

"IT'S HAD AN EFFECT ON THE ETHICS OF THIS NATION"

There are serious deficiencies in the announcement by Prime Minister Gillard of a plan to use East Timor as a processing centre for asylum seekers heading to Australia by boat.

Initially, no approach was made to the Prime Minister nor the Government of East Timor.

The President of East Timor is not part of the Government and cannot speak on its behalf. The process undertaken by Ms Gillard would resemble the Prime Minister of New Zealand asking the Governor-General of Australia if we would set up systems to deal with people seeking to flee Tuvalu because of rising sea levels.

Dr Ramos-Horta stated that East Timor was a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees and took the obligation to assist seriously. He also mentioned that the Timorese people knew from their own experience what it means to seek refuge and empathised with the plight of others.

Our opinion is that this comment was as much a suggestion as to Australia's responsibilities to refugees as a green light for the processing of asylum seekers on Timorese soil.

The nation of East Timor is still in an unstable condition, economically and politically.

All post-traumatic societies need years to recover from upheaval. An indicator of the precarious nature of life in East Timor is current research which shows that hunger remains a threat to many, and that progress remains elusive.

It is difficult to maintain an argument that taking Australia's asylum seekers could assist in alleviating these problems.

The jobs resulting from maintaining any processing centre would be minimal. The Timorese people would be offered the menial positions, judging by current practice in most foreign-controlled agencies.

The "Stop the boats" mantra plays on unfounded fears whipped up by the media for ratings purposes.



POVERTY AFFECTS THE CHILDREN OF EAST TIMOR

East Timor is the poorest country in Asia and in the Human Development Index rates 162 out of 182. Countries which rate lower than East Timor include Afghanistan and some African nations.

AUSTRALIA & UN REFUGEE CONVENTION

We are signatories and have obligations which are our responsibility

The Australian Government has said that asylum seekers, if housed in Timor, would be provided with the services required by the UN, e.g. proper housing, food and clothing, education, health services including that required for mental disturbance, and legal advice. Provision of these services would be an affront to people who for the most part eke out their existence without power or water and certainly without normal health facilities. The number of mentally ill people in Timor remains high, a result of years of military oppression and duress. There are few mental illness resources for them.

We can process asylum seekers

We cannot speak for the Timorese people, but we do speak as Australians. We maintain that Australia's asylum seeker problem is *our* problem, small by comparison with other nations' and able to be addressed on our own soil. As a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees we have a moral obligation to attend to the rights of all asylum seekers, whether they come by boat or by 'plane. We have the resources to investigate their cases as the International Community requires and we should not be sending them to any neighbouring impoverished nations for off-shore processing.

We deplore the attempt to make asylum seekers an election issue and look on it as an abuse of human rights. The effort to shelve the problem onto Timorese soil highlights the neglect by successive Australian Governments to educate our population in the obligations we have as signatories to the Convention on Refugees, e.g. there has never been a Government sponsored attempt to explain to people the difference between asylum seekers and refugees, and instead, politicians of all persuasions simply echo sections of the media which use emotive and misleading language like "illegal immigrants" and "boat people".

Australian ethics

There is a special link between the constant undermining of our national responsibilities in this area and our history alongside East Timor. The cover-ups and lies that characterised Australia's involvement during the Indonesian invasion and 24-year occupation, as well as the willingness to bully Timor into relinquishing some of its oil resources and the jobs they will create, is a sad indictment of us as a people.

As Bruce Haigh says (quoted in Cleary, "Shakedown: Australia's grab for Timor oil" p.32)

"It's had an effect on the ethics of this country."

We agree with Bruce's insight. It is impossible for Australia to be unscathed morally from its years of deception, collusion and theft. Having successfully and without remorse negotiated decades of unethical behaviour regarding a small and weak neighbour is it any wonder that Australia thumbs its nose at other international responsibilities, like asylum seekers?

Generous?

One of the greatest lies still being told is that we have been 'generous' with East Timor. In actual fact, Australia has received in oil tax revenue more than five times whatever we have spent on military and civilian assistance, money that has come from a disputed area of the Timor Sea, called Laminaria-Coralina. That money should be put into trust until the ownership of the area is decided.

On top of that, Australia has taken all the jobs and infrastructure of Bayu-Undan, another lucrative area, although Timor gets 90% of the tax revenue. However, this oil field lies 100% on Timor's side of a half-way line between our



A Timorese home

two nations. Australia is now gearing up to fight Timor for all the jobs and other benefits from another large oil and gas field, Greater Sunrise, which lies far closer to Timor than it does to us. Our Government and the oil companies, including Woodside, are working hard to ensure that Darwin gets all the downstream benefits. Timor argues that seeing we have all the processing from Bayu-Undan, they should get the infrastructure connected with Greater Sunrise.

For any Government official or radio talk-back host to claim that the Timorese should do their bit and help out their big friend Australia because of "all we have done for them" shows ignorance of the facts.

Another aspect is the extraordinary tale of the friendship shown to Australia by the Timorese during World War II, where at least 40,000 Timorese died as a result. There has been no official recognition of this unique fact, and indeed, it has been quietly suggested that any acknowledgement of Timor's World War II role now might seem as if Australia was twisting Timor's arm over the asylum seeker processing centre.

Both major parties are using asylum seekers to gain votes, a position rightly described as "reprehensible".

Susan Connelly & Josephine Mitchell

Facts

In East Timor 40% of people live under the poverty line of 55 US cents per day.

47% of children under five are chronically malnourished (stunted).

Infant mortality is 88 per 1000 births. In Australia it is 5 per 1000 births.

The mortality rate for children under 5 is 130 per 1000. In Australia it is 6.

Life expectancy is 61 years for women and 60 years for men.

The adult literacy rate is 58.6.

About 25% of primary school aged children have no chance to attend school.

Paul Cleary's book "Shakedown" is a clear and very readable account of the Timorese oil question.

His book on Timor in WWII will be out in August, titled "The Men Who Came Out of the Ground."