

## Luisa's Story

# “I ran to the mountains for safety...”

*In April 1974, the Portuguese armed forces mounted a coup d'état against the government in Lisbon (the "Carnation Revolution"), and announced their intention to withdraw rapidly from Portugal's colonies.*

*Political parties rapidly sprang up in Portuguese Timor. Elections for a National Assembly were planned for 1976, with full independence anticipated three years thereafter. By 1975, the leading political force in the territory was Fretilin (the Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor), which had established strong grassroots support throughout the countryside with progressive policies aimed at improving the lives of the people.*

*Under the pretext of saving the Timorese from civil unrest and accusing Fretilin of being communist, Indonesia planned for the invasion of East Timor and prepared through a process of infiltration. A three-week civil war followed, with fifteen hundred UDT (Timorese Democratic Union) troops against two thousand more successful Fretilin forces. The death toll in the civil war reportedly included four hundred people in Dili and possibly sixteen hundred in the hills. Both UDT and Fretilin were responsible for atrocities against their own people.*

*Continuing its destabilisation activities Indonesia inserted about two hundred special forces troops in early September 1975, followed the next month by conventional military assaults. A full scale invasion was mounted on December 7, 1975 and for the next 24 years the Timorese people endured a brutal occupation.*

*Luisa's family had fled from the Fretilin forces during the brief civil war and hid in the mountains for a year. Here is her story...*



**My name is Luisa; I left Timor in 1975 when I was 12 years old.**

**I left Timor to go to Portugal because of the civil war.**

During the war, I remember that with my three sisters and relatives I ran to the mountains for safety. We spent some days without food or water to drink. I remember the elders in our group could only cook during the daytime because in the night time the enemy could follow us through the light of the fire. In our group we were 15 or 16 people, more children than adults. The youngest was about one year old and the eldest was 68 years old. It was very hard to control the young ones to keep quiet. My uncles had to carry my grandmother on their shoulders sometimes because she didn't have enough energy to walk.

When it was time to eat, I remember we only had rice to eat. They cooked our rice in a tin which they found on the road and used seawater if we were near the beach. For 15 people they cooked one handful of rice and the rest was only water. When we ate, we could not even taste or feel a grain of rice in our mouths.

I remember one night we were so thirsty, they chased everywhere to find water and the only water they could find was in the cow pond. The water was dirty and the colour only God knows. But because of the dark we could not see the colour; only the taste of it told everything. After we drank the water they filled some bottles to take with us till we could find some other clean water. I remember some of us were really sick, but with God's help nothing worse happened to the rest of us.

In our group we lost my grandmother because of the illness and lack of food. Because she had no energy to walk, she was behind and we lost her. She didn't die but she went through much suffering and she died a few years later. In the wartime it is not easy for people to think who is next to you and who is missing. Adults have so many things in their minds such as finding food and water, carrying the young ones when they cannot walk and so on. I remember when we lost my grandfather; they did not even have time for mourning. Life is full of fear that makes you so confused and you cannot think.

cont...

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I was also lost from the group. At night in the dark we could not see one another. By mistake I followed another group, which had many children. Early in the morning, the family left, and I found myself sitting under a tree waiting for someone to rescue me. Thank God my sister found me and never stopped holding my hand till we reached safety at the border.

I went to Portugal with the Red Cross and came to Australia in 1982. Now I have three sons and always I tell them to appreciate whatever they have and to thank to God for the life they have.



## There were many children in the same position....

Luisa became a member of a choir called of “Coro Loro-Sae”, whose members write: “It was a painful journey which took us to Balteiro, Portugal. It started in August 1975 where we had to endure much suffering, leaving behind our beloved East Timor. We came from all corners of East Timor: Dili, Maliana, Ermera, Dare, Bobonaro; the list goes on. We travelled by foot, holding on to our loved ones, some climbing mountains, some losing loved ones along the way, escaping the gun shots, mortars, grenades and death.

Eventually we settled at the border of West Timor for about a year. In this foreign country there was more pain and misery. We had the pain of witnessing our people being harassed and having guns pointed at our loved ones by men in military uniform, the pain of not knowing the whereabouts of loved ones left behind in East Timor, and the pain of struggling to survive in a foreign country.

In 1976, some of us left West Timor for Portugal. Although cold, muddy and wet, with poor sanitation, the military tents were our ‘safe haven’. There were no complaints of hunger or cold or sickness but instead a bond of friendship emerged, especially among the young ones.

Maestro Cornelio Vianey da Cruz, a Choir conductor, gathered a group of young people to form the choir, known as “Coro Loro-Sa’e” (Sun Rise Choir). We met three to four times a week to rehearse at Cornelio’s tiny dwelling. We sang at Sunday masses and Coro Loro-Sae became well-known amongst the Portuguese community. Many invitations started to pour in seeking the choir’s performance. We travelled throughout Lisbon and many parts of Portugal to perform, expressing our culture, our identity and to some extent our struggle. In 1977, Coro Loro-Sa’e recorded its very first single, sponsored by the Red Cross.

To most of us, Coro Loro-Sa’e (in Portuguese “Sol Nascente”) was a significant part of our childhood lives. It helped us overcome the upheaval of leaving home. It helped us overcome our fear and gave us laughter and contentment. It helped us heal the trauma of our past. It helped us cope when we were sad because of not knowing the whereabouts of our loved ones. It helped us learn and appreciate the values of friendship. But most of all, Coro Loro-Sa’e became the family that most of us were forced to leave behind in our beloved East Timor.

Throughout the years members have left the choir, one by one, as the need to migrate to Australia became a vital part of each one’s life. Today, many are settled throughout Australia, in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Darwin and Perth. Some still reside in Portugal and some in East Timor.

***Thirty years after the foundation of Coro Loro-Sae, a Reunion of its original members including Maestro Cornélio, will be held in December 2008 in Australia to once again relive the memories of our childhood within the choir. To mark the occasion, the Choir will sing at Christmas Mass on 24.12.08 followed by a Concert on 26.12.08 and a friendly game of soccer.***

To what extent has the absence of stable political structures affected the lives of the Timorese people?

How is this different from Australia’s situation?

What benefits have Luisa and people like her brought to Australia?

Good reference material:  
[www.etan.org](http://www.etan.org)