

# Submission to the Australian Parliamentary Inquiry into Relations with Timor-Leste

It is pleasing that this Inquiry is taking place, as the relationship between Australia and Timor Leste comprises not only geographical and historical realities, but rests on moral issues as well.

Despite Australia being Timor Leste's major donor, it is often said among those interested in the relationship that the people are doing what Governments won't. This is not to denigrate what Australian Governments are doing, but simply to underline the importance of the relationship and to encourage a doubling of Australian effort.

A brief look at the past is necessary to see the present in context.

## History

Australia's invasion of Portuguese Timor on 17 December 1941 brought in its train large-scale devastation and death. Between 40,000 and 60,000 people died between 1941 and 1945 because of Allied bombing and Japanese reprisals against the Timorese for their support of the Australians. Thirty years later Australia supported Indonesia's invasion through tacit approval, inaction and de jure recognition of the regime, the only Western nation to do so. Throughout the 24 years occupation successive Australian Governments ignored the rights of the Timorese and argued consistently for the issues to be taken off the UN agenda. Throughout all of these decades, Australia positioned itself to appropriate the resources of the Timor Sea and to prevent the settlement of maritime boundaries in order to maximise Australian benefit from the oil and gas resources.

Official Australian support for Timorese independence came at the very last, after clear evidence of the loss of Indonesia's grip and the accompanying slaughter. INTERFET was led by Australia, with many service personnel happy to assist the Timorese, many seeing it as a way of beginning to address the moral issues arising from the historical record. Subsequent military and civilian help has been useful and highly valued by the people, despite the cost to Australia being one fifth of the

benefits gained from tax revenue from the Timor Sea since INTERFET entered the country in September 1999.

Even such a brief summary of the main historical facts shows that the relationship between Australia and Timor Leste is different to that enjoyed by Australians and those of other nations. Australia has no dispute with New Zealand, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea or other nations in the region over maritime resources, but with Timor Leste there has been long-standing and bitter division concerning areas on the Timorese side of the median line. Australia's actions in this regard are thrown into greater relief when one considers that the dispute is with people who have a major claim on Australian assistance because of the World War II experience and because of the less than honourable Australian position throughout the Indonesian occupation.

- Australia's position on the Timor Sea resources should be reconsidered as a matter of priority. The 2002 withdrawal from ITLOS and the maritime section of the ICJ must be reversed to enable Timor Leste to access to those international bodies during negotiations. Australia should negotiate in good faith with Timor Leste helping it to pursue all downstream benefits connected to the exploitation of Greater Sunrise. Maritime boundaries should be re-negotiated and the ban on public discussion of them until 2056 must cease.
- Timor Leste's access to all benefits coming from its land and sea resources is a matter of natural justice.
- The withdrawal of the UN and other international bodies, which is taking place as a result of Timor's progress, presents further economic challenges, making resource development crucial in minimising poverty. Australia has a moral obligation to cease its obstruction of Timor's ownership and exploitation of its natural resources.

## Education

The widespread absence of modern management experience and expertise among Timorese people is a result of their colonial experience under Portugal and the time spent under the Indonesian occupation, during both of which eras few Timorese were educated adequately or engaged in meaningful development of any sort. When Portugal left after 450 years in 1974 the illiteracy rate was 98%. Indonesia built more schools and required attendance, but advancement in every field was tied to the adoption of Indonesian identity and compliance with the regime. The present day difficulties experienced in management and education stem from this lack of opportunity.

- Australia could make a significant difference to the future of the Timorese people and strength existing ties by providing a unique program of educational opportunity in all areas, including management, either through a program of reduced fee tuition in Universities in Australia or through online courses whose fees are similarly reduced or waived. Such programs would go a long way to restoring Australia's good name after its silent complicity during the Indonesian occupation, which so adversely affected development.
- Australia could offer a carefully devised system of education assistance in the form of early childhood training and mother tongue education. Australian

universities and schools could be supported to offer practical help to Timorese universities, public and private, to establish high quality teacher training departments. Emphasis on basic teaching skills independent of high tech equipment is important. Children need to be taught despite the variety of poor teaching spaces still so widespread in Timor.

- Numerous groups and individuals in Australia spend much time and money supporting projects through which the Timorese people are learning, earning, educating and managing. Fund raising by these groups is varied and is itself a means of educating and enthusing other Australians to help. These existing people to people links could be more generously supported by Australian Governments through special project assistance, again, unique to Timor, because of the shared history. Government support for approved programs could be supported on a \$5 to \$1 or better basis for a twenty year period, to ensure that worthwhile programs do not wither just as the Timorese are beginning to take over.
- The training of health workers is essential for the future development of the Timorese people. Portugal did not produce a single Timorese doctor during its 450 year colonisation, yet Cuba has educated hundreds since 2002, making a major difference. Australia could assist by training many more doctors and nurses than the small number who gain scholarships at present.

## **Peace built on Justice**

The telling of the story of Australian/Timorese relations is muted in Australia, for obvious reasons, and when it is told in the popular media it is usually done in a way which presents Australia in the best possible light e.g. many Australians would think that we have been 'generous with Timor', as that phrase has been used by successive Governments and mainstream avenues of information to describe the Timor Sea negotiations. The senior secondary history curriculum does not do justice to such an important relationship within this region. Continued understatement of the facts is misleading to the Australia population. The unpalatable truths of Australian/Timorese dealings need to be faced. Accompanying the ownership by Australia of its responsibility arising from the past, developments towards the recognition of recent Timorese history by the international community should be supported.

- Programs of restorative justice could be devised, financed and implemented, allowing Australians to comprehend the extent of the suffering of the Timorese people as a result of political decisions, even though present generations are not responsible for what happened in the past. The Australian people, with their innate desire to be fair, are realising the enormity of the result of the past on Indigenous peoples, on those removed from families for a variety of reasons and on those abused by agencies, including Churches, who should have been caring for them. Similar honesty regarding the Timorese people is required if the relationship is to flourish in the future.

Australia has obligations concerning the application of justice to the crimes against humanity committed in Timor. It is beyond the capability of Timor Leste to address this aspect of reality at this time given the enormous task it has in bringing growth out

of chaos, but it is not beyond Australia's capability. Serious matters of justice remain unaddressed (cf [CAVR Report](#)). Nations cannot be allowed to evade responsibility for death and destruction on the scale that was committed in Timor Leste. Impunity emboldens individuals and nations to repeat their actions.

- Australia should begin an international pursuit of justice by first of all addressing the [recommendations](#) concerning itself, which appear in the CAVR Report.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

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