



## Timor-Leste Newsletter November 2021



This started off as a September Newsletter and somehow became a November Newsletter! Excuses? – lack of inspiration, nothing much happening or too many interruptions to my thinking and writing??? What a year it has been – one to go down in the history book of disasters! I hope as many of you as possible have had the covid vaccinations, are getting out of lockdown and will manage to catch up with family and friends in the not-too-distant future! I had my first social outing for many months a few weeks ago and it was quite surreal. Apart from lockdowns I have had a double knee replacement, seems to be a rite of passage these days for the older generation, so have been well and truly out of action for many months. Before the operation I told the surgeon that I had to be able to jump drains and climb fences again in Oecusse – have not been able to do that for many years without a help up from Luis or one of the team! The surgeon assured me he would do his best and so far, so good – not quite up to jumping and climbing yet but maybe by March-April next year I will be ready to go. Certainly hope so!



Covid has been working its way through Timor Leste - not as badly as I thought it would considering the health and poverty of the majority of the population. Since the beginning of the pandemic Timor Leste has officially recorded more than nineteen thousand cases with eighteen thousand recovered and 113 deaths. This has put extreme pressure on their health

system but with help from countries, including Australia, USA and China they have so far coped and have double vaccinated 51% of the adult population. Vaccinations for the 12 – 17 age group began in October and so far over 15,000 have received their first dose. (report from Ministry of Health, Nov 21)



**PRADET staff display their vaccination certificates.**

### **Project Work.**

Due to covid, border closures, political problems, illness of several staff members, (motorbike accident, TB, badly sprained ankle) and the fact that I have not been able to visit Oecusse for 2 years there is not a lot to report as far as project work is concerned. Even though the GREENTL team is very efficient and works well when I am there it is a different story when it has been so long since I have been directly involved. I guess they get a little disheartened as maybe I won't get back at all, the East Timorese are used to people disappearing on them! Also the car is causing problems once again and costing money – the bad roads cause havoc with any vehicle. Working out how to trade it in on a new model!

My intentions are to return to Oecusse next year, possibly late March once the Wet season has passed and the Presidential elections are over. Luis Armando has been planning for our 2022 activities and is keen to get them going. The first thing we intend doing is getting more bio-sand filtration units prepared – border closure means that GREENTL have not been able to purchase

the necessary barrels and as Rotary Australia has only recently restarted sending pallets I have not been able to get the pipes and taps etc up there. I have found that those sourced in Australia are much better quality than those from Indonesia so works out cheaper in the long term as they do not need replacing so often.



The first bio-sand filtration unit we put in, back in 2009, still going strong today!

Meanwhile a few projects have been set up – the water project in Oelet is underway but the leader of that project is one who has been quite ill so he has had to slow down. There has been discussion with the villages of Oelet and Oesono re fish farms. Luis has spoken with the Dept. of Fisheries who are prepared to support this with the supply of fingerlings. We need to ensure that proper fencing and other safety issues are very carefully maintained as even though the water in the fish farms is not deep it can be a hazard for small children.

Luis has also spoken with one of the local youth groups who are very keen to be involved in the tree planting project which will get underway soon as the Wet season is imminent.



As reported in my April Newsletter Timor Leste was hit by cyclone and floods earlier this year causing massive damage and food shortages. I have sent more funding for food packages, clothing and materials for re-building houses to help out in this recovery.



**Student Scholarships** continue and those involved, Liam, Tara, Ima, Adri, Marli and Stephanie continue to do well at school. (Wonder where the names Liam, Tara and Stephanie came from?) Stephanie is hoping to go to university next year in Dili and Ima wants to go to the technological Institute in Oecusse. Liam tops his class every year – he is now in class five so still has a long way to go. The money provided to them pays for school fees, exam fees (students pay to sit the exams so they can get a report), uniforms, books and also helps the families put food on the table.

Two young students, Liam and Tara, proudly showing off their new uniforms and backpacks.

## **PRADET (Psychosocial Recovery and Development in East Timor)**

Once again I have sent some funds to PRADET, a local NGO, to enable them to purchase clothing and white goods for the safe house in which victims of domestic violence can be given temporary residence. Whilst in the Safe House, the victims, mostly women often with their children, are provided with food and clothing and given help with medical needs, police enquiries and court procedures.

Once they are ready to leave funds can be provided to enable them to set up a small business, such as a kiosk, tais weaving or vegetable gardening so as to become independent of the abusive family. The incidence of domestic violence is quite high in Timor Leste, particularly in Oecusse this year due to disasters of the covid, floods and loss of housing. PRADET is such a well recognised and well run organisation that domestic violence victims feel safe reporting to them which is possibly one of the reasons that domestic violence



seems to be high in Oecusse – maybe in other subdistricts the numbers are actually hidden by non-reporting

Clothing and food for distribution to victims of domestic violence.



## **A Fateful Episode in Timor Leste's history.**

**30 Years After Santa Cruz** (from articles by Fundasaun Mahein, a Human Rights organisation and ETAN, East Timor & Indonesian Action network)

I am sure most of you, with your interest in Timor Leste, have heard of the horrors of the 1991 Santa Cruz Massacre. For me it was seeing that event on the news with footage shot by Max Stahl, which made me aware of what was going on in Timor Leste and I was saddened by the fact that I had not known of this beforehand – generally hidden from us by the Australian government of the time. Here is a summary of the many stories which have been written on this, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that event.

“Fundasaun Mahein was deeply saddened to hear of the passing of Max Stahl yesterday in Australia following a long illness. Max was a true hero and friend to Timor Leste – his courageous filming of the Santa Cruz massacre opened the eyes of the world to the brutal reality of Indonesia's military occupation. Several documentary films produced using Max's original footage, were screened around the world reaching an audience of millions. Max worked tirelessly together with other journalists, Timorese activists and international solidarity campaigners to publicise the struggle and suffering of the Timorese people.

It is a sad but beautiful irony that Max Stahl passed away on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 2021 in Brisbane, 30 years to the day when a young Timorese independence activist, was killed by Indonesian troops and which led to the peaceful procession to the Santa Cruz Cemetery to mourn his death. The events that unfolded on the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1991 began with the memorial event for Sebastião Gomes which transformed into a protest against Indonesian rule. Indonesian soldiers opened fire on the crowd at Santa Cruz cemetery, killing over 500 young people – some dying in the cemetery and others later that day at the Indonesian run hospital where they had been transported for “treatment”. Many others simply disappeared. Max Stahl was in Dili, posing as a

tourist while working secretly with several other foreign journalists investigating allegations of human rights violations committed by the Indonesian military. He had been filming continuously since the early hours of the morning and captured the events on film.

As the Indonesian soldiers entered the cemetery brandishing guns and bayonets, Max Stahl buried his video tapes in a fresh grave next to where he was hiding. He returned to the cemetery later that night to recover the films and managed to have the footage smuggled out of the country. The film's most iconic moment – in which a young man, bleeding heavily from a gunshot wound, is cradled by his friend, while they are surrounded by the sound of people praying and the wailing of military sirens – is seared indelibly into the memories of all those who have seen it. Miraculously, the young man survived, and a statue commemorating this scene now stands facing Motael Church, where the fateful chain of events began.



The harrowing footage filmed by Max Stahl was shown globally and was a turning point in the fight for Independence – it stirred major public controversy around the world and eventually led to the Timorese people being permitted to vote in a referendum on special autonomy or independence. On 30<sup>th</sup> August 1999, under UN supervision and militia terror, thousands of Timorese people courageously voted for their independence, ending 24 brutal years of Indonesian military occupation.”

I was there for the Restoration of Independence Celebrations, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2002, and have been



every year since, except for the last two due to covid restrictions.

In 2002 the United Nations flag went down and the Timorese flag took its place.



Timor Leste has made some great strides forward with rebuilding infrastructure and governance but there is still a long way to go, especially in the subdistricts outside Dili, to lift the general population out of poverty, poor health and illiteracy and provide meaningful employment for young people who are crying out for improvements. The changes which were promised in 2002 sadly have not materialised equally throughout the country. I wish everyone a happy and safe Christmas and New year and hopefully we can look forward to a better 2022. Many of us in Australia will be enjoying a very plentiful Christmas – please think of those less fortunate, a few dollars can make a big difference to a child in Oecusse.

Donations over \$2 to the Sustainable Villages project are tax deductible:  
Donate online by going to the Rotary Australia World Community Service, (RAWCS) website.  
<https://donations.rawcs.com.au/Default.aspx?ProjectID=592&ReturnTo=4> (Sustainable Villages Oecusse)  
Or via OzGREEN: [https://ozgreen.nationbuilder.com/east\\_timor\\_donation](https://ozgreen.nationbuilder.com/east_timor_donation)