



Kangaroo Valley – Remexio Partnership

The Newest Nation on Earth

Jacinta Garret's recollections

As I flew in over East Timor, only one and a half hours flying time from Darwin, I felt I was arriving in a completely different world – a world which is difficult to describe to those who have not been there. I will do my best. The beautiful green hills if Timor Loro Sa'e with its gatherings of silver-roofed settlements courtesy of recent UN distribution of corrugated iron, belied the conditions on the ground. The palm trees and jungle appearance, UN helicopters and aircraft reminded me of how Vietnam must've been like during the Vietnam war. Driving from the airport at Comorro into Dili with Maureen Magee (who thankfully was there to meet and support me during my first four days in East Timor), I was met with reminders of the recent Indonesian occupation. There are many monuments still in evidence of Indonesian dominance. As well, significant signs of commerce with stalls lining the roadside and traffic chaos with seemingly no road rules, beeping horns, the odd restaurant amongst rubble, no road signs through the CBD of Dili, with destruction or damage to every building. The roads led us through the main market (Mercardo) of Dili, which is colourful but filthy, the people doing their best to sell their merchandise for prices which would seem a pittance to many Australians, but to the Timorese, often unemployed or on very low wages, these prices are expensive. In East Timor there is no social security for those in most needy circumstances. We did not stay in Dili, but went straight on to Remexio 20km further into the mountains. We passed by Balide church, home of the Anin Murak (Golden Wind) choir which visited Kangaroo Valley last November. We stopped there for a few minutes when we recognised some of the choir members standing by the church gates. They knew us straight away, and we were greeted by broad welcoming smiles and hugs. An hour's trip further on and our arrival in Remexio was quiet but welcoming, and so much cooler than Dili. My proper time in East Timor had begun. I must say that for the first week or so I was suffering a severe case of culture

shock, loneliness and homesickness. Conditions for everybody in Timor including the UN and NGO workers, but particularly for the Timorese people, are hard. Day to day living is hard, and the people in Remexio live a hand-to-mouth existence at almost subsistence level. Walking is the most common transport, and everywhere you see people streaming with their produce to the market in Dili or other major centres. Men women and children carry huge loads on their heads or on poles over their shoulders. Loads of corn, green vegetables, even animals like chickens and pigs are carried in slings. While living in Remexio I was the first customer for the newly opened Uma Turismu (Guest House) and restaurant.



Construction materials for Uma Turismu

This development was made possible by an AusAID grant that Maureen Magee applied for. Still being developed and in line for further funding from the UN Investment Office, the guest house is off to a fine start and being supported enthusiastically by the CIVPOL officers stationed in Remexio.



Timor Loro Sa'e policeman being served at Uma Turismu Restaurant in Remexio

At \$25 (Aus) per night including three meals a day, the ladies of the OMT (village women's group) are hoping to attract custom from UN personnel and those needing respite from the heat of Dili. With a new sign on the main road (painted by Rosemary Stanton's father, Alan Finley), and glossy brochures (donated by Bill Rigney in Nowra) being distributed in Dili and Darwin, this will soon be a reality. I was privileged to meet many fine people in East Timor and Remexio. The women who looked after me at the Guest House,

for example Maria Fatima with her five beautiful children and two who succumbed to disease at one week old, and Mrs Theresa with four surviving children from eight-two dying from famine—and whose first husband was killed by the pro-Indonesian militia. These are strong, resilient people who have endured. Many homes in Remexio have been partially or severely damaged during the destruction following the August 1999 ballot for independence. They live without electricity, with mostly only a cold water tap outside. They cook over a fire on dirt floors without a chimney—the smoke billowing out from underneath leaky corrugated iron roofs. They have coughs and runny noses. There is a 40% incidence of TB, Malaria is common, Leprosy exists and Dengue Fever is common. World Vision has the general Health contract for the Remexio subdistrict, and Dr Mymy, a Philippino doctor for World Vision comes to remexio twice a week. The outlying villages do not appear to be regularly serviced by a doctor, so if you are sick, either you walk kilometres, you get better without help, or you die.

By chance, Louise Morgan (who joined me in my last week in East Timor) and I were told about a Chef de Suku (chief of Village) in an outlying village who was suffering from abscesses—a common complaint possibly due to a poor standard of hygiene. We were driven over appalling roads to visit him. Taking medical supplies that we had been given by a doctor in Aileu—the main centre for the district Remexio is part of, and formerly a Falantil stronghold. Outside his house on a dirt-floored verandah with very basic equipment, 20 or so people, goats, pigs and dogs looking on, Louise cleaned and treated the wound as well as able. In excruciating pain he had to appear brave in front of his people and with the added disadvantage of the wound having been dressed previously with animal manure of some description. Louise will go back to review his treatment assisted by CIVPOL. The girl who took us to that village was also an inspiration. A federal policewoman, Kendelle Clark, was with the UNAMET mission overseeing the 1999 Ballot. She stood up to the Indonesian Military in their attempts to intimidate the people as they voted. The ballot station she was supervising was subsequently torched by the military after Kendelle and her fellow electoral officers hastily withdrew on the afternoon of voting, taking the ballot boxes with them. Following the

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ballot she was in the compound in Dili with many East Timorese people as well as other UN staff when the situation exploded with the Indonesian army and pro-Indonesian militia commencing their destructive tirade. All her group, including refugees, were safely evacuated. Kendelle is now working as a voter registration officer in Remexio subdistrict preparing for the upcoming inaugural election. She is to be awarded a medal for bravery by the Australian Government for her part in the UNAMET supervision.

I also had the great honour of meeting Sr Dorothy of the 'Mary Knoll' order—a Catholic order of nuns based in New York with some 70 nuns world-wide working in third-world countries. Sr Dorothy has been in East Timor for ten years running a school and health clinic. The clinic was completely destroyed in 1999, and they

now work from very basic temporary accommodation while their original clinic is being rebuilt. Working with her is Dr Collette Livermore, originally from Moss Vale. Dr Collette has a two-year contract which began in August 2000. She works and lives in trying circumstances, but with obviously great feeling for the people she treats. She and Sr Dorothy are initiating the first major TB prevention and treatment programme in Aileu, which will take in the Remexio subdistrict and its outlying villages. I had an opportunity to sit in on Dr Collette while she was working and found her way with the people inspiring. I had many amazing experiences in my short one-month stay in Timor Loro Sa'e. My impressions here are merely sketches. I have made many friends and I hope my relationships with these people continue far into the future. One day I hope to return. Beautiful, sad, Timor. Hau hadomie. ♥