

Birth of a new nation ...

"East Timor's dignified moment", "World sees the soul of a most forgiving people", were typical of the newspaper headlines that appeared following the independence of East Timor on Monday, 20 May.

Colonised and repressed for over 400 years, the East Timorese raised their national flag and celebrated in the spirit of forgiveness despite thousands of their people having been violently killed in the long independence struggle. President Xanana Gusmao said, "We East Timorese can show the world what we have inside our souls." As if to demonstrate this, he led President Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia (one of the international dignitaries attending the independence celebrations) to the podium and raised her hand in friendship to the applause of the crowd. After 24 years of Indonesian military occupation it was a gesture of the forgiveness Mr Gusmao now seeks for his country.

Truth and Reconciliation

With so much suffering having also come from internal conflicts, before and during the carnage of the 1999 Indonesian troop withdrawal, the path to reconciliation will not be easy. In an attempt to try and heal these deeply-felt grievances and the desire for revenge, a Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation has been established to run for the next 2 years. It has been set up in consultation with communities in all 13 districts of East Timor and in West Timor also. An independent statutory authority, the Commission's stated purpose is to inquire into human rights violations committed on all sides between 1974 and 1999 and facilitate reconciliation with justice for those who have committed less serious offenses. Its three main functions are firstly to establish a truth-telling mechanism for victims and perpetrators to describe, acknowledge and record human rights abuses in the past; secondly to create community reconciliation, with

commissioners and local leaders mediating each case to reach agreement on an act of reconciliation to be carried out by the perpetrator; and thirdly to make recommendations to the Government for further action on reconciliation and the promotion of human rights.

The hope for future generations

Both the leaders of East Timor and from across the world are putting great store in the outcomes of the Commission.

"We want to learn from the lessons of the past so that we will be able to prevent similar tragedies in the future. At the same time, we wish to open the door of forgiveness and acceptance to those who were caught in the vicious cycle of violence."

- José Ramos Horta, Foreign Minister, East Timor

"The Commission provides an historic opportunity for the people of East Timor. It will give a voice to the victims who have been silenced through years of oppression and violence. For them, the Commission may help to restore their dignity and heal their wounds. It will create a record for this and future generations of the East Timorese people. That record shall stand not only as a warning not to fall into the abuses of the past but also as an encouragement to show that evil can be overcome and that good can conquer bad."

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu, South Africa.

"To achieve true healing will be difficult. First, it will require strength and openness from victims who will be called upon to re-tell often distressing accounts of traumas they have experienced. Second, and just as important, it will require those who caused the trauma to publicly acknowledge the part they played and to accept responsibility for the effects of their actions. We now await the telling of stories, the reconciliation of

communities and the reforms that must prevent such violations in the future."

- Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

"In humility we shall offer all our shortcomings and sins and ask for forgiveness from our political foes. We should embrace one another again and look forward to the future, to a new life and world, especially for our next generations."

- Bishop Carlos Bello, East Timor

David Lih, an East Timorese Australian, expresses his thoughts about Independence Day. David coordinates youth-targeted programs in the Community Development Division of the Moonee Valley City Council.

Independence Day is a concept that I have learnt since my late primary school years back in East Timor before 1992. It is a concept I had first learnt through history studies in the previous education system, a concept, I'm sure all East Timorese have yearned for because of its own, unique history. And as of 20th May 2002, the possibility has become a reality. So real, it all seems almost surreal. Yet, as the day approached I was overcome with a moment of peace shadowed by a brief moment of doubt (and perhaps fear) and then I took comfort in the fact that many years of endless prayers have finally been answered. The whole world has recognized and embraced the birth of a new nation. I was filled with such strong feelings of relief, joy and contentment.

Over the weekend leading up to the big day, I celebrated the moment in my own little way. With every sip of the drinks I took, I silently thanked God, The Almighty and cheered for our beloved Timor Loro Sae.

Although over the last ten years I have learnt to call Melbourne home, my ties with my birth country will always be strong. No matter what, Timor Loro Sae will always have a place in my heart and I will always be there in spirit and in prayers. And in True Blue Aussie spirit, I thank all Australians, Indonesians and the rest of the world for their support and camaraderie in promoting a fair, just, peaceful and harmonious society. Viva Timor Leste! Viva Xanana! And thank God for EVERYTHING!

The latest from Action for Life (AfL) ...



... in Vietnam

We were able to visit various NGOs including the Christine Noble Children's Foundation which has helped thousands of abused, forgotten and neglected children by opening shelters, orphanages, clinics and schools. Vietnam has really opened my eyes and has also strengthened my desire to do whatever I can for the children who are forgotten or hidden. Christine had the desire, she made the decision and she dared. Can I?

- Sharon Hopkins, Canada

Our meeting with an Abbot at a temple in Dalat cemented my initial intention. I think I have found the biggest reason for being part of AfL, although it seems scary - to unite and connect Vietnamese and Viet Kieu (Vietnamese living abroad) all around the world for a better Vietnam.

- Loan Phan, Australia

... in Cambodia

Ilde Slanke from Latvia was able to share her experiences of fighting corruption in her country while working for three weeks with the Cambodian organization Centre for Social Development. Their programmes include National Issues forums giving voice to ordinary people and the Cambodian Public Accountability and Transparency Project.

The last two weeks for the whole group included running a three-hour workshop on Leadership Teamwork, and Active Listening for 25 young adults, and a fascinating dialogue with Father Francois Ponchaud (See the film *The Cross and the Bodhi Tree*). His book, *Cambodia Year Zero*, was one of the first to expose the Khmer Rouge. One university student wrote a card: "Your effort is affecting my thought and heart so much... I find myself changing a lot in terms of mentality and moral thinking ... The Reflection Time is really the basic point to make me patient and tolerant towards others, and to have the courage to do something that my inner voice tells me."

... in Taiwan

130 people assembled at Tainan's main university for the *Change Starts with Me* conference at the end of our stay. Six of us shared highlights from

the two months in Taiwan as well as something of what we are learning on the course overall. Then participants broke into small groups, followed by an open floor session. For me, Taiwan was one of the big draw-cards for joining AfL. And while the time was not always what I'd anticipated, it gave me more direction about my future than I've had before. Being responsible for the overall programme did force me to look at how I deal with responsibility and stress. It also reminded me of the importance of listening to my heart in discerning what particular needs God is calling me to address, rather than throwing myself blindly into everything.

- Sarah Wood, New Zealand

... and to Korea

During our time in Korea, we shared the vision of the MRA international movement and let people know about our experiences, learning and spiritual journey while in AfL and beyond. And I hope we formed a basis that I could follow through on after AfL.

- Cheol Min, South Korea

Asia-Pacific Youth Conference

The climax of this 10-month program will be the Asia Pacific Youth Conference near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 24th July - 2nd August. At least 160 young people from the region are expected. AfL are setting up a bank account in Malaysia to assist those who have financial difficulties attending. Contributions are welcome. (Details from the Editors of *Newsbriefs*)

Life Matters Course

Armagh Melbourne

5-14 July, 2002

Participants are making their way from across Australia and the world for this nine-day live-in course.

The UK, Poland, Japan, India, Nagaland and Burma will all be represented - and there is still room for more young Australians to avail themselves of this unique opportunity.

Further information is available from *Armagh*, 226 Kooyong Rd, Toorak, Vic 3142.

Mahboba Rawi is an Afghan refugee from the time of the Russian occupation. Some years ago, a freak wave swept several of her family to their death at Kiama on the NSW coast. Since then she has given all her time to raising money for the widows and orphans in the camps on the Pakistan border.

Having seen first-hand the corruption and desperation in these camps, she has established a network which bypasses tribal chiefs, police and paid aid workers. To date she supports over 4,000 orphans and many widows, and has been instrumental in establishing two bakeries and a chocolate factory. She now aims to raise enough money to build an orphanage back in Afghanistan.

She was recently guest speaker at a Mother's Day Breakfast at Bardwell Park Uniting Church. Apart from the chance of an eye-witness account of the struggles of millions of Afghan refugees, it was the first time the church had hosted someone from the Muslim world, and a generous donation was collected for her work.

- Jane Mills, Sydney

I have recently joined a team of volunteers in the after-school homework centre of a hostel for Aboriginal girls near our home. In the past months I have struggled and learned along with the girls. On both sides we can sometimes feel misunderstood or rejected.

No-one is very keen about homework at the start of the afternoon but by 5:30 pm we have usually battled through to some result on paper!

On Sorry Day I went with my husband to a wonderful local event (sausage sizzle, story telling etc with hundreds attending) and was delighted when suddenly a minibus drew up next to us full of girls from the hostel who were waving to us and smiling.

- Rosemary Thwaites, Sydney

Journey of Healing - from Australia to Rwanda ...

**John Bond reports on
Sorry Day 2002:**

The front-page headline in the *Canberra Times* (27 May) read: "Sorry Day - thousands take journey of healing". The picture showed a girl carrying a Journey of Healing balloon. She was part of a crowd estimated at 3,000 by the journalist covering the story. Aboriginal spokespersons, including Prof Lowitja O'Donoghue and musician Jimmy Little, reached many more Canberrans via TV and radio.

Sorry Day happens in communities large and small all over the country because Aboriginal people want it. Most of the events are Aboriginal-organised. They are a chance to reflect on the past and find strength for the future in the spirit of the Journey of Healing's themes, "recognition, commitment and unity".

Plenty of strong feelings are expressed. That is necessary. As former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser said in his statement on Sorry Day, "We ignore at our peril the disillusion, despair and anger in many Aboriginal

communities. If we let this situation fester, sooner or later that anger will spill out beyond the Aboriginal community, and we will all pay a heavy price."

I was invited to take part in a moving ceremony in Parramatta Park, Sydney. In recent months, former residents of Kinchela Boys' Home have come together for the first time. Kinchela is in Kempsey and was the principal home in New South Wales to which Aboriginal boys removed from their families, were taken. It was a hell-hole. So many who went there have ended up in addiction, psychiatric hospital or jail. Now some of them want healing and part of their healing journey, they know, is to return to Kinchela. The Sorry Day ceremony was the launching point of this journey. They will meet at Kinchela in September. Residents of Kempsey have responded, and are preparing to welcome them back.

Despite their pain, these people are still helping others. A few months ago we received a request for a member of the stolen generations to take part in a

conference on 'Healing the victims of genocide' in Rwanda. A woman called Lorraine, who is deeply involved in healing the stolen generations, decided to go. When she returned she said she will never be the same again. Soon after her return came a message from the conference organisers, who had so appreciated her contribution that they have decided that their Council should permanently include an Aboriginal Australian. Already another Aboriginal woman, with extensive experience in trauma counselling, has offered her services.

Lorraine took a Sorry Book to Rwanda containing messages of apology to the stolen generations from hundreds of Australians. When the book returned, a message had been added. "Having been very recently victims of injustice, hate, denial of humanity and genocide, we understand the suffering endured by the Indigenous people of Australia. Let us work hand-in-hand to set up conditions for a better future for all humanity." It was followed by the names and signatures of 91 Rwandans.

*John Bond is Secretary of the
National Sorry Day Committee.*

Wars that can be won ...

Against the background of pogroms against Muslims in Gujarat, India and the continued suffering of Palestinians in the Middle East, Rajmohan Gandhi spoke recently to a mostly Muslim audience in the USA. He suggested that a non-violent strategy was still the shortest way to winning justice. We print an extract:

To citizens and residents, the USA offers freedom in a greater degree than other nations do, but US foreign policy, like the foreign policies of most nations, suffers from weaknesses. In the case of the US, these weaknesses include, apart from ignorance, firstly, bias, and secondly the attitude, 'Don't bother me, or don't entangle me.'

I find it hurtful when the killing of Palestinians is regarded as the skilled execution of justice by those who always see the killing of Israelis as murder. But I ask Palestinians and Arabs: what is the point in a campaign of the gun or bomb against an Israel backed to the hilt by the might of the

USA? In my view the suicide bombings have been suicidal, murderous, dramatic, courageous, and immensely counter-productive.

Let us find campaigns, battles and wars that can be won - battles to create teams of young Arabs who love one another and who have a clear vision of the future they want to see; battles to create, or where they already exist, to publicize Arab examples of enterprise, of charity, of creativity in business, or education, or public health; campaigns for the attention of the American media; and a war for the minds and souls of human beings across the world, including in America.

It may be foolish to challenge American might but it may be intelligent to address American citizens, to make a case to them, to inform, challenge and where possible shame them into acknowledging US bias and US ignorance and the humanity of the Palestinian cause, and to invite them to enjoy the benefits that the goodwill of the Muslim world and of the third world may confer. And it may make sense to devise new non-violent

strategies for fighting for the honor of the Palestinians, and for taking this non-violent war into the mind of every US citizen, and indeed of every Israeli.

I should end, however, with Gujarat. The refusal of the Central Government to take steps in Gujarat makes the situation insecure for Gujarat's minorities and for those wanting to protect them. We have to assist the installation in New Delhi and Ahmedabad and all across South Asia of governments committed to minority rights.

Finally, I have a question. We denounce what is wrong. Great. But are we making the effort to recognize and appreciate those trying to do something about it? In Gujarat or the Middle East, anyone, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu or atheist who does something to protect the threatened or assist the wounded, or shelter the homeless, should be praised or thanked by us and if possible aided with money.

Rajmohan Gandhi is an Indian writer and academic, a member of the international Initiatives of Change Council, and a life-long worker for reconciliation on the Indian sub-continent.

Perspectives from the Middle East ...

With the international conferences at Caux, Switzerland, due to begin on 5 July, Dr Bryan Hamlin, a scientist in Cambridge (Massachusetts) gives a personal perspective on the Middle East, and those from this part of the world who have been affected by previous visits to Caux:

I have made seven visits to Israel and Palestine over the last fourteen years, two with Rabbi Marc Gopin whose new book, *Holy War, Holy Peace*, is most timely. For anyone associated with the Middle East, indeed for most people, the violence of recent weeks has been heart-breaking. Dr Gopin and I decided that one thing we could do in a crisis like this was to simply care for people, to care for our friends. The recipients of our phone calls and e-mails may feel that our expression of care helped them, but what they gave to us was an inspirational reminder of the heights of human courage and nobility.

Power of apology

A memorable moment at Caux last summer was when Israeli Merri Minuskin spoke from the platform, "I apologize for the sorrow and loss of dignity my people in Israel have inflicted on the Palestinians ... Every morning I make a choice to make a difference ... With God as my witness, I promise to do more." Two Palestinians in the hall led a standing ovation. Merri and her new Palestinian friends have stayed in touch and she has stuck to her promise.

Through her work with the International Institute in Israel, Merri has for some time organized weekly discussion groups between Palestinian and Israeli women. I called Merri after the terrible Passover bombing near where she lives when 28 people died. I was very doubting when she told me that she was going ahead with her next women's meeting, especially when Israeli tanks invaded the West Bank, from where the Palestinian women would be coming. Amazingly, nine

Palestinians got through the various obstacles and showed up. Then the meeting began with one of the Israelis announcing that her cousin had been killed in the Passover suicide-bombing. "I can't go on with this peace-work anymore", she said. However, when some of the Palestinian women offered to come to the shivha, or wake, of her relative, the Israeli was deeply moved and decided to stay with the discussions.

Then somehow Merri was in touch by phone with the head of the hospital in Jenin, scene of the fiercest fighting on the West Bank. The hospital was desperate for medical supplies. Eventually, Merri was able to get hold of two truck-loads of medical supplies and arrange for them to get through to the hospital. Merri received a very emotional phone call of thanks from Dr Abu Ghale whom she has yet to meet.

Friends from both sides

The four Palestinians who were in Caux last August, from Gaza, East Jerusalem and Israel, have stayed in touch. Several friends, myself included, were deeply moved to receive Easter greetings from Kamal and Nadine Halawa, Muslims from East Jerusalem, in the midst of their difficulties.

In recent weeks Marc Gopin and I have talked several times on the phone with a Palestinian family in Bethlehem. For several days they could not get out of their house and our friend's brother was missing. The family feared that he was one of those holed up inside the Church of the Nativity. Their eight year-old son needs regular injections for a serious health condition. Fortunately a Red Crescent ambulance has been able to get to their home. When I asked about food, my friend chuckled and said that they were out of meat but still had a fair amount of rice. He's heard from his brother by phone. It is unnerving when these friends always seem to start the conversation by asking how I am!

In recent weeks passions have been high, and not just between the combatants in the Middle East. Finger

pointing has become a major pastime. Some who used to be for reconciliation have become advocates for one side or the other. I cannot afford the luxury of taking sides. I simply have too many Palestinian *and* Israeli friends, whatever their governments do or don't do. When my children were smaller and did something wrong I came to learn that at that point I needed to love them more, not less. The challenge seems to be to extend that love we feel for our immediate family to ever widening circles.

Neichü Angami from Nagaland, who recently worked with MRA-IC in Australia, writes from Jerusalem:

When I returned home from Australia last July, I learned that my village church was praying to send someone from our church to "go and live in Jerusalem, the Holy City of God, and give whatever God may ask". Four months later, through the conviction in my own heart with confirmation from my pastor and church elders, I made the decision to come and live here in Jerusalem for one year, fully supported by my church and family.

I am now living in a *Messianic Reconciliation Community* on the Mount of Olives, which is committed to building relationships with Jews and Arabs, and other ministries. My training at *Armagh*, the Australia-Pacific Centre for MRA-IC surely prepared me for this community life. We are 14 people from 13 nations living together. The Mount of Olives has the biggest Arab community in Jerusalem and I am beginning to build wonderful friendships with some of them. They are extremely generous and greatly enjoy having guests in their homes. I am also beginning to connect with people who are fully involved in peace initiatives and trust-building programs. I want to listen and learn. Sometimes I see utter hopelessness; other times I see life-giving energy and light. God surely had an appointment with me here. I can only say "Thank God I am here now!"