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## Indonesia-Timor Leste: Is this true friendship?

Galuh Wandita , Jakarta | Fri, 09/25/2009 12:19 PM | Opinion

Ten years ago, on Sept. 5, 1999, Father Hilario Medeira called to say that he did not think he and the hundreds of terrified families at the Suai Church would survive the day. They had run out of food and medicine, and he no longer felt able to stop the wave of violence encroaching on his doorstep. On the other end of the phone was a group of humanitarian workers in Dili, made up of Indonesians and East Timorese, committed to bringing aid to the victims of violence, in an attempt to preserve some universal values of compassion amid the rising surge of violence over the UN-administered ballot, held on Aug. 30, 1999.

Not long after this phone call, violent attacks took place in almost all 13 regencies in East Timor. The UN evacuated, and everyone scattered to seek safety as East Timor turned into a murderous inferno. But the friendship and camaraderie among those Indonesians and Timorese who had worked together to uphold our common humanity, shaped by the risk, adventure and loss experienced during those days, withstood the test of time and remains vibrant despite the fact that East Timor is no longer part of Indonesia.

Coming back into East Timor with Oxfam's emergency team, I visited the Suai Church in October 1999. The town was still deserted, except for a few brave souls who had hidden in the mountains. When they returned, they placed bright pink and red bougainvillea flowers in the places where they knew people had been killed then torched. In one corner of the church, a set of keys, broken glasses and burnt human remains were covered with flowers. "This was Father Hilario," whispered a young clergyman who had escaped the massacre. Two other priests, Father Dewanto, a young Indonesian Jesuit, and Father Francisco also perished along with scores of civilians seeking refuge at the church.

All over the compound were empty boxes of noodles, discarded empty dishes and human belongings, clothes covered in bloodstains. Not long after, women's groups began documenting stories of abduction, rape and sexual violence, and began providing support for some of the survivors. Ten years later, Indonesia has made some progress in acknowledging the truth with regard to its dark past. In relation to the Suai Church massacre, a rigorous inquiry was conducted by Indonesia's human rights commission (KPPHAM Timor-Timur) regarding the 1999 crimes leading to the trial of 18 defendants by an ad hoc human rights court. However, all defendants were either acquitted at the first instance or upon appeal, and these trials have widely been dismissed as not meeting standards of a fair trial.

The Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF) focused a considerable amount of its resources into examining the crimes that took place at the Suai Church, including the sexual crimes committed alongside the disappearances and murders that took place. When it handed over its report in June 2008, the CTF concluded that "pro-autonomy militia groups, the TNI, the Indonesian civilian government and the National Police must all bear institutional responsibility for gross human rights violations

targeted against civilians perceived as supporting the pro-independence cause. These crimes include murder, torture, rape and forced transfer or deportation." This report was officially accepted by the presidents of Indonesia and Timor Leste in June 2008. The CTF was mandated to seek the "conclusive truth" on what took place in 1999, and close the door on the past. The former was accomplished through its review of the performances of the serious crimes trials in Jakarta and Dili, as well as an assessment of the findings of the KPPHAM inquiry and Timor Leste's truth and reconciliation commission (CAVR). The latter is not such an easy task. Closing the door on the past involves more than merely the stated policies of state officials. Policies cannot force themselves on the feelings of people affected by these events, especially victims and their families.

Official inquiries by the KPPHAM, CTF, several UN commissions and the CAVR all came to the same finding: that crimes against humanity were committed in East Timor in 1999. With this finding, a new legal obligation emerges - the obligation to prosecute those responsible. True to its name, crimes against humanity offend all humankind, and do not distinguish their victims and perpetrators on the basis of nationality.

The CTF report, now in the hands of the Indonesian and Timor Leste governments, has set a foundation for friendship based on truth. However the "conclusive truth" that crimes against humanity took place in East Timor in 1999 has given rise to a new set of responsibilities - the responsibility to bring perpetrators to justice. Genuine friendship means speaking the truth, even when the truth is painful and brings difficult consequences. If Indonesia is not ready to grapple with justice for these crimes, perhaps our friendship with Timor Leste will allow us to defer this for a while, but the responsibility will never perish. It cannot be wished away, and if not dealt with now will continue to haunt the next generations of our citizens. This is clearly evident in trials currently taking place in Cambodia, Bangladesh, Argentina, Peru and many other countries where perpetrators of crimes against humanity are being brought to justice decades after they committed these crimes.

Justice for Father Hilario and the thousands of victims killed, raped and tortured in Timor Leste is also still elusive. Indonesia's role in promoting friendship with Timor Leste should be like any true friendship. It must be based on a willingness to accept and face the truth, no matter how painful and unpleasant, and to take steps together so that the snarling dog of the past is properly dealt with.

*The writer was a humanitarian worker in East Timor in 1999, and currently a senior associate at the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ).*