

## **Bringing Them Home:**

Fifteen Stolen Children Reunited with their Families in Timor-Leste  
20-27 November 2017

"I feel reborn today," said Antonio Ximenes in the car on the way to the airport in Bali. He carefully took out a tattered black and white photograph of his sister from his wallet. "I have carried this picture with me for 35 years. It was my source of strength." A day later Antonio held his sister in a long embrace, in his village near Same, Manufahi.

Antonio along with fourteen other "stolen children" (now adults, living in Indonesia) have been reunited with their families during a week-long visit on 20-27 November. Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), as part of a working group spanning two countries, has traced these individuals in Indonesia. Based on their memories, working group members searched for the children's families in Timor-Leste. Galuh Wandita, AJAR's Director stated, "Finding and reuniting these stolen children with their families is part of a list of urgent unfinished business from a violent and tragic past. The fact that the two governments have contributed to the travel costs for this reunion is a first step towards a larger and more sustained effort to tracing these children and their families. Until they are reunited with their families, they are still living with the consequences of the violations they experienced as children decades ago."

During this visit, the 15 survivors came from Liquisa, Ermera, Aileu, Ainaro, Manufahi, Dili, Viqueque, Baucau and Lautem. They were taken from their families between 1977-1998, with almost no contact for two or three decades. The youngest was taken when he was six years old. Of the 15, three are women who were taken when they were ages 8, 12 and 13 years old.

Timor-Leste's truth commission, the CAVR (2005), found that several thousand Timorese children were forcibly removed to Indonesia during the conflict (1975-1999). The CAVR found that "the widespread practice of removing children displayed a mindset that by taking control of Timor-Leste's territory, Indonesia also gained unfettered control over its children...ABRI members and other individuals with power in Timor-Leste felt that they were entitled to take an East Timorese child home without their parents' permission." Both the CAVR and the bi-lateral Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF, 2008) made recommendations that the Governments of Indonesia and Timor-Leste take effective steps to find these individuals and facilitate reunion with their families. After many years of inaction, human rights groups from the two countries have taken the initiative to facilitate these family reunions.

A Working Group was formed in 2015, led by AJAR, involving civil society groups such as the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS), Association of the Families of the Disappeared in Indonesia (IKOHI), Labarik Lakon-Sulawesi in Indonesia, and in Timor-Leste, Asosiasaun Chega Ba Ita (ACbit), Asosiasaun HAK, Fundasaun Alola, Timor-Leste Red Cross (CVTL), and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Timor-Leste (ICRC – TL). The Working Group works closely with Indonesia's National Commission for Human Rights (Komnas HAM), Timor-Leste's Ombudsman for Human Rights and Justice for Timor-Leste (PDHJ), and Centro Nacional Chega (CNC). This working group has now identified more than 100 stolen children and facilitated five reunions for 57 stolen children and their families.

Welcoming the group, Silverio Pinto, Timor-Leste's Ombudsman, endorsed the commitment to this issue, stating, "It is the right of all persons to know their families and their heritage. This remains the duty of the countries." Vella Oktarini, representing Komnas HAM, reaffirmed the cooperation between the PDHJ and Komnas HAM saying, "Our Memorandum of Understanding includes a joint commitment to finding these separated children as a foundation of friendship between the two countries."

Building upon the momentum brought by this reunion, the Working Group asks the Governments of Indonesia and Timor-Leste to implement the recommendations of the CAVR and CTF. These include:

- Form a commission to "acquire information about the fate of disappeared people and cooperate to gather data and provide information to their families," including those of the stolen children.
- Together with civil society; relevant international agencies; government ministries; the two national human rights institutions, Komnas HAM and PDHJ; and the Centro Nacional Chega, develop a program or mechanism to fund and facilitate reunion visits for greater numbers of stolen children who have been located.
- Uphold the rights of stolen children by issuing identification and citizenship documents and providing free visa status for stolen children and their families who hold Indonesian passports and who wish to visit Timor-Leste.

- Support and fund civil society in the two countries who seek to trace, document and address the legal, financial and psychosocial needs of the stolen children and their family members.

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**Further Information***Timor-Leste*

The Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (*Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação*) was formed in Timor-Leste (2002-2005) with the mandate to determine the truth about human rights abuses during the period of conflict from 1975-1999 in Timor-Leste. More information regarding the CAVR report is available at [www.chegareport.net](http://www.chegareport.net) and CAVR's web site, [www.cavr-timorleste.org](http://www.cavr-timorleste.org)

In October 2016, in response to an on-going campaign by civil society and victims' groups, the Government of Timor-Leste passed a Decree Law establishing the Centro Nacional Chega (CNC). The CNC is a statutory body established as "a place of research and learning about the history of Timor-Leste and preservation of memory, promoting solidarity towards those most vulnerable survivors of human rights violations in the past." It will also focus on the issue of the stolen children.

*Indonesia*

The Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF) was an official joint Indonesian and Timor-Leste body that commenced in August 2005 and submitted its final report in March 2008. Its mandate included to establish the truth about human rights violations before and after the 30 August 1999 Popular Consultation, make recommendations to heal the wounds of the past and strengthen friendship based on a shared historical record. The CTF recommended the formation of a commission on the disappeared to "acquire information about the fate of disappeared people and cooperate to gather data and provide information to their families," including information regarding the location and condition of all Timor-Leste children who were separated from their parents and families (see *Per Memoriam Ad Spem: Final Report of the Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF) Indonesia – Timor-Leste*; 2008).

In October 2011, the Indonesian government issued a Presidential Decree on the implementation of the CTF recommendations that included a recommendation to search for the separated children (see Presidential Decree No.72 Year 2011, "Rencana Aksi Implementasi Rekomendasi Komisi Kebenaran dan Persahabatan Indonesia dan Republik Demokratik Timor-Leste" ["Action Plan for the Implementation of Recommendations by the Commission for Truth and Friendship of Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste"]).