



# A Constant Longing

**A study of the impact of the separation and reunification of East Timorese “stolen children” and their families**



Australian  
National  
University

School of Regulation  
& Global Governance  
(RegNet)





Bikeli gradually recalled how she used to walk around the hills in Maubisse, Timor-Leste before she was taken to Indonesia in 1979. © Asia Justice and Rights/Armin Septiexan

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### **LAYOUT**

Satoejari

### **COVER PHOTO**

Alin, a sibling of a stolen child from Timor-Leste, is preparing bougainvillea flowers for a visit to

the family graves upon his arrival. It has been decades since they last saw each other. © Asia Justice and Rights/Armin Septiexan

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 1975 and 1999, during the Indonesian occupation, children were abducted from their families and taken to Indonesia. Since 2013, Asia Justice and Rights, or AJAR, has led a program searching for, and reuniting, East Timorese ‘stolen children’ with their families. This work has provided important insights into the children’s lives in Indonesia, and their experiences of reunification (see AJAR 2016a). This report extends the work in two ways. Firstly, by exploring the separation and reunification experiences of stolen children *and* their biological families and, secondly, by providing insights into the long-term needs, following reunification, of both the children and their families.

The report is based on a collaborative study between AJAR and Dr Lia Kent of the Australian National University.<sup>1</sup> The exploratory, qualitative research was carried out in July 2023 in Bali and Dili, and involved semi-structured interviews and participatory ‘body mapping’ exercises with eight stolen children and their biological families.<sup>2</sup>

Research findings highlight the lasting emotional and social impacts of child separation, both for the children and their families. They also draw attention to the value of reunions and the long-term complex implications they pose. While overwhelmingly welcomed by both the children and their families, the reunions are only

the beginning of a process of rebuilding relationships, raising difficult issues, including language and cultural communication, disrupted cultural responsibilities, economic resources needed for future visits and, for the children, a profound sense of divided identity.<sup>3</sup>

We urge both the Timor-Leste and Indonesian governments to recognise the value of the reunion program, and to provide additional support for efforts to search for, and reunite, these now adult children and their families. For example, more flexible visa and citizenship arrangements, as well as financial and language learning assistance would greatly facilitate regular visits, which everyone interviewed desires. We argue that the reunification program is not only important for the children and their families but could play an important role in strengthening economic, social and cultural relations between the two countries, a priority for both governments.

## BACKGROUND

During the occupation, thousands of Timorese children were sent to Indonesia to be raised by Indonesian families or to be placed in educational institutions. Children were abducted from their families not only by individual military officers on an *ad hoc* basis, but they were also taken by government agencies and religious and charitable organisations (CAVR 2005: Volume III, Part 7.8). Earlier work showed how child transfers were critical to the New Order regime, underpinning its ‘civilising mission’, and

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- 1 This study was funded by the ANU and the Centro Nacional Chega (CNC), with additional co-financing from Bread for the World and the European Union. This report was written by Lia Kent, Galuh Wandita, Mulki Makmun and Raisa Widiastari. We thank Riza Afita Surya, Agung Seldy Arimsyah, Inocencio Xavier, and Nuno Rodrigues Tchailoro for valuable research assistance.
  - 2 Additionally, members of the *Labarik Lakon* (Missing Children) Working Group conducted a survey with 23 survivors in Indonesia, asking questions about their experiences being separated from their families, growing up in Indonesia, their reunion and reflection on its impact. These findings are included as an annex.

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- 3 A companion publication to this paper is a photo-book with the same title: “A Constant Longing: Ten Stolen Childhoods, Ten Years of Searching and Reuniting” (AJAR, 2023). The book captures the body-maps depicting the life-stories related by 10 survivors and, in response, how their families responded to the missing child and their experiences of reunion.

its goal of transforming East Timorese into ‘loyal’ Indonesian citizens (Van Klinken 2012).

Since 2013, AJAR has led a program searching for, and reuniting, East Timorese ‘stolen children’ with their families. Recognising that child transfers involve varying degrees of coercion, AJAR uses the term ‘stolen children’ to describe children under 18 who were taken to Indonesia by public officials or with the consent of public officials without the explicit consent of their families (AJAR 2016a). The program involves collaborating with organisations in both Timor-Leste and Indonesia, as well as with the stolen children themselves, to locate individuals in Indonesia and to identify and locate their families in Timor-Leste. Organisations and individuals formed a working group called *Labarik Lakon* (or Missing Children) which, to date, has traced 176 children and organised reunions for 101 of those children.<sup>4</sup> Reunions take place in Dili, and involve visits of around ten days to the children’s home villages, accompanied by a member of *Labarik Lakon*. The reunions are supported by Indonesia’s *Komnas Ham* (or the National Human Rights Commission), together with Timor-Leste’s *Centro Nacional Chega*.<sup>5</sup>

In July 2023, AJAR and Dr Lia Kent, of the Australian National University, collaborated on a research project exploring the separation and reunification experiences of eight East Timorese stolen children (now in their 40s and 50s) and their biological families. The project had two key aims. The first was to increase understanding of how the children *and* their Timorese families negotiated the long periods of separation, recognising the limited knowledge of Timorese coping strategies. The second was to develop a

better understanding of the long-term support needs of the children and their families, in order to inform AJAR’s future reunification program and its advocacy work with the governments of Timor-Leste and Indonesia. Research in other post-conflict and post-authoritarian contexts suggests that reunifications, while bringing a sense of joy and relief, can also be disorienting, generating complicated emotions and expectations (see Barnert *et al.* 2015 on El Salvador). We were, therefore, interested in understanding how Timorese stolen children and their families make meaning of the experience of separation following reunions, and how they create new relationships. How do they navigate cultural, economic and linguistic divides? What are the challenges for national, cultural or religious identity? What support is needed for these new relationships to be maintained (if so desired)?

## METHODOLOGY

This was an exploratory, qualitative research study aimed at generating rich, contextualised data. We organised a two-day participatory ‘body mapping’ exercise, as well as individual, semi-structured, interviews in Bali with eight former stolen children (five men and three women). All the respondents had participated in reunions organized by AJAR between 2013 and 2019. We chose the body mapping method because it allows survivors to take agency in the telling of their stories, and to reflect on their life experiences, not simply through verbal communication, but also by drawing the marks of trauma and joy on outlines of their bodies.<sup>6</sup> Eight former stolen children were selected to represent a cross-section of participants from

4 Members of the *Labarik Lakon* Working Group include: Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), KontraS Sulawesi, KontraS Surabaya, IKOHI, LBH Bandung, KontraS, SKP-HAM Sulteng, CNC, Yayasan HAK, ACbit, Asosiasi Nasional Korban Timor-Leste (NVA), CVTL and ICRC-TL.

5 Centro Nacional Chega (CNC) is the successor organisation to Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR), Timor-Leste’s truth commission.

6 AJAR has developed a series of participatory processes as part of a truth-telling and trauma-sensitive healing processes. Add Stone and Flower, and Body Mapping ref. See Annex 1 on PAR Workshop Process



A group of stolen children posing for a picture after participating in a bodymap workshop conducted in Bali, Indonesia, July 2023. © Asia Justice and Rights

previous reunions. Specifically, we aimed for a mix of respondents from different geographic locations, as well as a mix of women and men. Following the Bali activity, we organised interviews and a one-day ‘body mapping’ workshop with eight respondents, members of the children’s biological families in Dili, with the addition of one stolen child who had already returned to Timor-Leste.<sup>7</sup>

The report is divided into four sections reflecting different phases of separation and reunification for both the children and their families: (i) the circumstances of separation; (ii) the period of separation; (iii) the reunion and its lead-up; and (iv) after the reunion. Our goal is

<sup>7</sup> One interview was conducted in Iliomar (July 2023).

not to provide an accurate historical representation of events, but rather to examine the impact of the separations on respondents’ lives through their memories, feelings and hopes for the future.<sup>8</sup> We do not claim that this small sample is representative of the views and experiences of all stolen children and their families. The report concludes with recommendations to the Timor-Leste and Indonesian governments, human rights institutions and other civil society organisations in Timor-Leste and Indonesia.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. The circumstances of separation

The eight respondents, now all adults, were separated from their families when they were aged between three and eleven. These separations occurred between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s. The children came from families with different political affiliations (FRETILIN, UDT and APODETI). While they came from diverse geographic locations, including Iliomar (Lautem), Railaku (Ermera), Laclubar (Manatuto), Ossu (Viqueque) and Alieu, most were from the east of the country, where the conflict was most intense. The children also came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, for example, some were from poor families, while two were the children of *Liurai* (or traditional rulers).<sup>9</sup>

Most children were abducted by individual members of the military, however two were sent to Indonesia by Islamic education institutions.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, the children were taken by force,

<sup>8</sup> In some cases, we also draw on data from previous interviews conducted by AJAR with these respondents.

<sup>9</sup> Lina and Tito

<sup>10</sup> Bahrul was sent from the Kuluhun foundation in Dili the Hidayatullah foundation in Makassar. Yanto was sent to a Pesantren (Muslim boarding school).

while in others, written or verbal ‘agreements’ were obtained, often under duress, from the child’s parents, often with promises to feed, educate and care for them. The majority of children were transported to Indonesia by sea. However, one child was taken by a Hercules aircraft.<sup>11</sup> Despite these differences, all separations took place against a backdrop of war and violence. Many families seem to have been singled out because they were high-value targets (for example, affiliated to prominent political parties or resistance figures), or because they were economically vulnerable.

Domingus, born in Ermera in 1972, remembers moving to Los Palos with his father, who remarried when he was very young. During the invasion, families hid on Mt Matebian, but Domingus’ father built a bunker below their house, where they remained hidden for a week. He remembers later meeting his adopted father, a chaplain assigned to Battalion 202, who made an agreement with his real father to educate him in Indonesia.

*When the war came, people ran up to Mt. Matebian. However, my father dug a bunker under our house and we watched the attack from that hiding place.*

*After the soldiers arrived, they built a (Protestant) church. We were baptized there by a Javanese priest. Then we were moved to Viqueque. There I was often left to play at a cooperative where I helped with the cooking. I met a priest who adopted me, and also another friend, Nina, who left in the ship that took us to Jakarta. We were first brought to Laga. Then boarded from a small boat to a big ship named ‘Gunung Jati’. The ship brought us to Makassar and Surabaya, before finally landing in Tanjung Priok (the port of Jakarta).*

Simao, Domingus’ brother, recalled:

*When the soldiers took my brother, Domingus, they said the situation was war and children can’t be here. They promised to bring him back when the situation was normal.*

*They put children on a Hino truck and took them to a military camp, near Los Palos. There were so many children, boys and girls, waiting to be taken to Indonesia. Ever since that day, we lost touch with him.*

Bahrul, born in 1985 in Ossu, remembers how in 1995 an Islamic organisation, the Kuluhun Foundation, sought his parent’s permission to take him to Dili to study. Bahrul remembers being happy about getting an opportunity to study because he wanted to learn. From there the foundation wanted to send him to Indonesia and again sought his parent’s permission. His parents hesitated, but Bahrul was determined to go. He was curious to see Indonesia. Eventually his parents agreed. His parents were told he was going to Makassar to the Hidayatullah Foundation, an Islamic boarding school:

*Our school was in front of military barracks. Every day, after school, we were in the water looking for shrimps and eels. We played soccer, went to the gardens to pick cassava leaves. We used to trade with the soldiers for food. They gave us biscuits and noodles. Sometimes, at the riverside, we would make a fire and grill the shrimp we had caught. There was a mountain named Mundu Perdidu.*

*In 1995 when I was ten years old, I was taken by a foundation based in Kuluhun, Dili. Many of us converted to Islam. Sometime later, 12 of us boarded a ship. They shaved our heads, so we would be easy to find. We were on the Dobonsolo passenger ship and sailed to Flores, then Makassar. In Makassar, they distributed us: I was sent with one other boy to an Islamic boarding school. His new name was Usman, I never knew his Timorese name.*

However, after only one year in the boarding school, Bahrul was adopted by a doctor who lived in Palopo, and his parents were not informed.

Nina, born in 1974 in Laclubar, Viqueque, was the child of a *Liurai* (traditional leader). She remembers how the Indonesian military would regularly take her as a young child to their barracks to play, dropping her home at night. One soldier, who did not have a daughter of his own, wanted to adopt her. This soldier threatened

11 Tito

Nina's father, telling him he had to decide between protecting his people and keeping his child. Nina's father reluctantly agreed. Nina recounted:

*The soldier said, "If we don't take this child, we can kill you all." The soldier didn't have a daughter. He wasn't interested in my younger brothers. He only wanted a girl, that's how I was taken.*

*It was in 1979. We were brought to Laga. From Laga we boarded a middle-sized boat. We had to move to a small canoe to board the bigger boat. I was crying and crying, wanting to go back to my parents. But we were in the middle of the ocean. No one could take me back to land, to Laga.*

*In order to make me forget about going home that man plunged me into the ocean twice. I fainted. Maybe I was too tired from all that crying. I remember I was just wearing my underwear. I was put on the big boat. The soldiers climbed up the big rope. The name of the boat was Gunung Jati, if I'm not mistaken. They pushed me through a round hole in the side of the boat. When I came to, I was at the back of the boat where the soldiers cooked (AJAR 2016b).*

Nina's mother described her daughter's abduction:

*A soldier stole Nina from us. My husband reported it to police in several places demanding her return. I told them, "Do not to take and hide away my child. She is not an animal that you can just take to put on a barbeque and eat. She is a human being." Not long after, a man named J came and told us that he wanted us to sign a letter (to handover Nina). I wasn't there when the letter (for her adoption) was signed. As a mother, I felt lost (AJAR 2016b).*

Rosa, born in 1973 in Railaku, Ermera, only has vague memories of being taken by a soldier when she was only five, and she and her older sister were separated from their family:

*Memories of my childhood – harvesting coffee, bringing our coffee beans to market on horse-back. Our coffee was grown in Railaku. We would pick coffee there, me tagging along.*

*When the conflict broke, we ran to the forest. My older sister and I got separated from our family. Feeling sorry for us, soldiers took us to a military post.*

*One of the soldiers asked my sister if he could take me. She said, "No!" But then they tricked her. They took her on a walk and put me into an official car going to Dili.*

*I don't remember much about my childhood in Timor. My adopted father told me I came to him when I was only five years old. He took care of me, bathed me. He said there were many children in the same situation as me.*

*I don't remember how long I stayed in Dili, then boarded a ship to Makassar. There I stayed with some relatives of the soldier who took me, and later on I was taken to Toraja to take care of his parents.*

Bikeli (renamed Martina) remembered how she had met a young, single military officer in 1977, when she was just eight, while playing alone in the jungle near Aileu. He told her he wanted a sister. Martina's aunt said there was no agreement, and that the military officer had a gun and threatened the family. After Martina was taken to Dili, the family heard that she was about to go to Indonesia by boat. They travelled to Dili but were unable to prevent her departure. Martina recounted:

*I remember being with my family, playing with sticks, eating cassavas and mangoes, playing with my siblings. We ran to the forest, running to all the corners of the wind.*

*When I was eight years old, I was taken by a soldier to Jenapontoh in Sulawesi.*

Arseika (renamed Anti), born in 1971 in Aileu, remembers being abducted at around the age of eight. At that time her father was a FALINTIL commander and she and her mother and younger siblings had been living in the forest for some three years.

*I remember my childhood – living with my family, going to fetch water, going to the fields. We were a happy as a family. We could do whatever we wanted. But the conflict tore us apart.*

One day, when Anti and her mother were fetching water, they met an Indonesian soldier:

*I remember how my mother held onto my hand as the soldier tried to pull me away from her at the riverside in Becora. He hit her.*

*I was brought to Makassar, by the soldier who said he had no children.*

Anti's father described the situation:

*In December 1978, the forces did the encirclement campaign. The space to move was getting smaller, we couldn't go to Lekidoi or Ermera. My wife said they would go and hide in a cave. Over 100 people went there, there was bombing. Then.... the family was captured. The Indonesian military took them to Desoli, they spent one night there in the military post. Then they took them back to Aileu, by foot. They washed in the river.*

*They took Arseika's (Anti) to Aileu and held her in a house they had commandeered. Soldiers from Battalion 13 took me to Suco Liurai and detained me there.*

*Sometime in February I was released, and they told me that they had taken her to Indonesia.*

Tito's story of his transfer to Indonesia was particularly complicated. In 1978, he remembered how, after his father died, his mother, two sisters and the rest of the villagers fled to Mt Matebian to escape attack and to shelter with FRETILIN. He was around eight at the time.

*[On Mount Matebian] everyone had to save themselves. We ran everywhere looking for safety. Whenever we arrived some place, the military told us where to go. They said we had chosen to be part of Indonesia, even though we hadn't surrendered.*

Tito's sister Julieta remembers:

*After almost two years hiding, we left Iliomar to Matebian, and in 1979 we came back to Iliomar. We were in Matebian for less than a year... We had food, yam and corn. The people who lived near the village sometimes collected food. We had to plant in order to have a food supply. When we were in the jungle we produced food, until the resistance*

*support base was destroyed, when we could not produce anymore. Our leaders asked the people to surrender ... We had nothing, no food, no clothes ... The Indonesian military forced us to live at the concentration camp in Iliomar, prohibiting us from going back to our village. We could not produce our own paddy or farm our fields.*

Tito remembered the hardships during that time, especially the lack of food. It was not long before he was recruited by the Indonesian military in Iliomar to gather water, cook and clean for the officers. According to Tito's sister Julieta, a key factor in this recruitment was that Tito had witnessed Indonesian soldiers' torturing and killing his uncle. She explained:

*Tito was looking for grasshoppers to feed domestic birds of the Indonesian military [to exchange for food]. Tito saw the killing of his uncle. Tito was traumatized. He wanted to escape, but the soldiers asked him not to run away or he would be shot. From that moment, Tito lived with the military.*

Tito remembers:

*I ended up being a member of the auxiliary force (Tenaga Bantuan Operasi) with the Iliomar police, then with the local military command. This was the most difficult and bitter time for me. I witnessed my own family being tortured. Our village community leader was tortured to death.*

*After some time, I was taken to Los Palos, then to Dili. All the Indonesian soldiers that came to Timor-Leste only stayed for eight to ten months. One day I was called to become a TBO in Muapitine.*

After a time living in the forest and accompanying soldiers on their patrols in search of FALINTIL, the commander persuaded Tito to accompany him to Jakarta. He was just 12. The soldier told him 'I am your father now' and promised to send him to school. Tito remembers feeling torn. He did not want to leave his sister, who was still small (and they were orphans) but, at the same time, he wanted to see the big city of Jakarta. His sister described how she met the soldier prior to Tito's departure, yet he did not



give his name or provide any details of where they were taking Tito:

*They were armed, we were afraid to ask. After meeting with Tito in Los Palos, he told us that he would go to Dili, the ship already waiting for them. Less than a week later he went to Indonesia.*

These stories demonstrate the diverse circumstances in which children were taken to Indonesia. Resonating with existing studies, the motivations of the abductors are infused with the powerful ideology of the New Order, with its emphasis on transforming East Timorese into 'civilised' and loyal Indonesian citizens through education (see Van Klinken 2012: 39). The elements of coercion and vulnerability are present in all these stories, even in cases where agreements were reached with military officers or educational institutions. Amid the chaos, displacement, violence, hunger and limited information that marked East Timorese lives during the occupation, and the proximity with which many lived to the Indonesian military, families often felt they had little or no choice but to relinquish their children. They were sometimes persuaded by promises from military officers or educational institutions that they would educate and take care of the children, giving them better lives.

## 2. The period of separation

### Growing up in Indonesia: dislocation, violence and loss of communication

Just as the experiences of separation were diverse, so too were children's lives in Indonesia. Children were taken to different parts of the country – Makassar, Jakarta, Toraja, Bandung and Surabaya. Some informants described being treated well by their adopted families. Anti described being cared for, as though she was the soldier's own daughter. Tito was also cared for by his adoptive father. Bahrul who, after living in a boarding school in Makassar for a year, was adopted by a doctor, and described being

especially close to his adoptive mother, who loved him and treated him like her own child.

Others, however, were treated very badly, describing experiences of verbal and physical abuse, and doing hard domestic chores. Domingus remembers the name calling:

*We were brought to the Battalion 202 military barracks. Initially, it was fun. But then they started calling us names – "Fretilin kid" or "Timor kid." I think I was there for about a year.*

Nina explains that her adoptive parents disliked her, and she was regularly abused.

*I stayed with that soldier from 1979 to 1984. During that time I was treated very roughly. Sometimes they didn't feed me. I had to work hard, selling ice popsicles. I could only come home when I had sold all the popsicles. I was five years old, but I had to go to school. I had to get up at 3am to wash all the clothes and do all the house chores. My feet were full of cuts from an infection I had. When back from school I had to help again, washing the clothes, washing dishes, helping out with everything. Then I went out to sell popsicles. If they didn't sell, I wasn't allowed to come home. I wasn't allowed to eat. The soldiers near my house, living in the barracks felt sorry for me. They said 'Poor child, she is beaten everyday, scolded everyday, made to work hard everyday.' Sometimes their wives felt sorry for me, and secretly gave me food. But I was scared because that soldier didn't allow it. He said, 'It's shameful to the neighbours (AJAR 2016c).*

Rosa was sent to live with her adopted father's parents in Toraja, where she worked very hard doing domestic chores like caring for livestock, cooking and washing. She couldn't attend school because it was too far from the house, and she eventually ran away.

*I worked very hard, taking care of livestock.*

*One day I ran away, to the city of Palopo. I was so confused and lost, I started crying. Someone offered me work, selling cakes and drinks at the bus terminal. Eventually, a member from my adopted family in Toraja found me and my adopted grandmother came to get me.*

*I was back in Toraja for a while but then I ran away again. This time I found work in a factory. A few years later, I married in 1989.*

Even those who had relatively benign or even loving relationships with their adoptive parent, experienced dislocation and disruption. Some moved several times to live with different family members, as the military moved to new postings. The children's identities were remade. Some converted to Islam because their adopted families were Muslim. The majority were given new names. Asika's adoptive father changed her name to 'Anti' (an abbreviation of *Anak Timor/* child of Timor), a name she still uses today. Bikeli's name was changed to Martina.

Compounding this dislocation was the children's loss of contact with their East Timorese families. Most children describe having no contact with their families after their move to Indonesia. This was sometimes due to the adoptive family withholding information or giving false information. Rosa recalls that when she was invited to meet the *Labarik Lakon* working group:

*I asked why I had been invited to meet in Makassar. Then Nina answered, that your family was looking for you. I said what I knew was that my parents had all died, then Nina answered, oh, who said that? I answered again that my adoptive parents said that the family had died.*

Nina described how her adoptive father told her that her father was dead, killed by Indonesian soldiers, and that her mother had abandoned her to return to Portugal:

*When I was abducted, I was a Catholic, but the family who took me made me convert to Protestantism. But I went back to being a Catholic when I married. According to the man who took me, my mother was named Maria, and she went back to Portugal. 'There is no need to look for her,' he said. 'This is something you do not need to know (AJAR 2016b).*

The multiple waves of displacement in East Timor created barriers for children seeking to

communicate with their families. Domingus, for example, explained how, even though he wrote to his family in Los Palos in 1984, he did not receive a reply. Martina described how, because she moved so often and changed her name, her family was unable to find her. Anti had some contact with her family before 1999, and she has kept the few letters sent to her via the International Committee for the Red Cross. Her adopted father travelled to East Timor in the 1990s as part of his military duties and met her biological father. When he returned, he told her that her father, her mother and her siblings were still alive. However, after the 1999 referendum, there was no further contact, and Anti assumed her family must be dead.

The children experienced disrupted education. Those who did attend school often struggled, and felt they did not have the capacity to learn. As well as adapting to a new culture and language, the children were suffering from shock and the emotional turmoil of being wrenched from the social fabric of their families and communities. Many had traumatic experiences of the conflict, which disrupted their early schooling. They often felt themselves to be academically behind. Some felt (or were made to feel) different by other students. Tito, for example, felt self-conscious and was teased by other students for being older and bigger than them.

These difficulties meant the children often got into trouble at school. Bahrul describes how he was expelled from high school for fighting. Anti remembers how she stopped school at grade three because the other students made fun of her, and insulted her for looking different, and she fought back. After that she stayed at home and did domestic chores. Nina describes being tired from all the chores she had to do before and after school – selling ice, cleaning, washing up and gathering wood – learning was a struggle, but she was determined:

*I had a resolve that whatever happens, I have to get an education. I had to pay my own way. The man who took me, he paid my school fees for a while, but*

*his wife was jealous of me. After I graduated from high school I moved away from home (AJAR 2016b).*

Nina stood up to her family. She reminisced about a photograph of her standing behind a new motorbike purchased by her adoptive family. She was shooed away, but hid and stood up when the photo was taken.

*Now it seems funny. I wouldn't let them get the better of me. I always found a way to get back at them. I remember thinking, 'If you can do it, why can't I? I am Timorese' (AJAR 2016b).*

She found work at a factory and received assistance to get a university education.

Martina left school after grade three because she struggled to learn to read. She worked at home in the kitchen and the garden. Domingus managed to get to secondary school:

*I went to primary then secondary school--but I quit in ninth grade. I left home and took to living on the streets. I got involved in a lot of bad things, even jailed for eight months.*

The fact that many children did not finish middle or high school has had enduring economic and social implications, and most have not found well-paid or secure employment.

For the three women respondents, marriage was an accepted way to escape from the confines of their adopted families. Anti, for example, married a widower after the death of her adoptive father. Nina fell in love with a fellow university student, who later became very supportive of her work with other stolen children. Anti entered a marriage of convenience with someone decades older. She recalls:

*I was brought to Makassar, by a soldier who said he had no children. I was treated ok, never tortured. I refused to go to school. Later, I took care of my adopted father and when he passed, I inherited some gold. In 1988, I married a widower. We have two children. I work to make a living selling things in the market.*

Martina recounts:

*When I was 15, my adopted father died due to an illness. I was married off to a man in Bulukumba. He was 20 years older than me.*

The death of an adoptive parent sometimes led to drastic change. In some cases it was a release from duty and the beginning of a freer life.<sup>12</sup> But the death of an adoptive parent could also usher in a new chapter of poverty. For instance, Tito was the main carer of his adoptive father, who never married. When his father passed away in 2014, members of the extended family evicted Tito, his wife, and their three young sons from the home they had lived in for decades. As his adoptive father did not leave a will or any legal papers, Tito and his family are homeless, living on the sidewalk where he established a tyre repair business.

### Impact on East Timorese families: too many thoughts (*hanoin barak*)

Separations had a profound impact on East Timorese families. Many described situations where they did not know who to turn to for help. They talked about feeling overwhelmed with 'too many thoughts' (*hanoin barak*) and living in a state of uncertainty in which they did not know whether their children were alive or dead.

In some cases, families tried to write to their children. However, due to the children's continuous movements and before changing of their names, they often lost touch. Bahrul's family for instance, lost contact with him after he was adopted from the Islamic boarding school without their consent. Tito's sister Julieta described how she originally had some communication with her brother. However, after 1997, she lost contact and wondered if Tito was still alive:

12 Working Group members face considerable resistance from adoptive family members where women survivors are expected to be full-time carers of an elderly family member. In at least 3 cases, their reunion visit was delayed for many years, until the family member passed away.

*I felt a loss of heart and hope. There are only three of us, Tito is the one and only brother. We guaranteed Tito but the military forced him. I felt the loss of everything. I felt so sad because I did not know if he was alive or dead ... My heart was broken.*

This uncertainty resonates with what has been described as a condition of ‘ambiguous loss’: ‘a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present’ (Boss, 2004, p. 554). This condition has been described as ‘stressful’, ‘tormenting’ and ‘infinite’ because the ambiguity of the loss impedes grieving (Boss 1999). It leaves family members in a state of emotional flux, oscillating between the hope that their loved one will return and the despair that s/he may not. Ambiguous loss has important socio-cultural dimensions in Timor-Leste where, if the dead are not properly buried and cared for, their spirits remain trapped in a liminal realm, restless, wandering and unhappy. Failing to conduct proper rituals can cause family members to be punished by ancestors through, for example, illness and disaster. This can have long term ramifications for intergenerational wellbeing, and for relations with the spirit realm.

*Hanoi barak* often manifested as physical and mental ailments. For example, Rosa’s cousin explained that her father developed a complicated illness that involved severe headaches from ‘too many thoughts’ after his youngest daughter was taken to Indonesia. He died before independence, and before being reunited with his daughter. Domingus’ younger brother explained that his father, who never drank alcohol, began to drink heavily. Domingus’ step-mother was also badly affected; whenever she heard someone call the name ‘Domingus’ she would get upset and she never stopped thinking of him.

Martina’s aunt explained that her mother became sick from thinking about the disappearance of her child, and she died of a broken heart.

Nina’s cousin recounted how her abduction was so painful for the parents that the child’s name was never mentioned within the extended family until 1999, when the Indonesian occupation ended. Timor-Leste’s independence provided the political and social space for Nina’s parents to tell their story:

*When I first saw the photos [of Nina] I was shocked. Because the family never talked about Nina, never mentioned her. But I believed.*

The abductions sometimes caused family rifts, and led families to become wracked with guilt for ‘allowing’ the child to be taken. Domingus’ younger brother described how his abduction caused a ‘small war’ in the extended family. One side of the family blamed the other for not doing more to hide Domingus from the military and ‘allowing’ him to be taken.

Families sometimes had internal disagreements about whether death rituals should be conducted for the lost child. Domingus’ younger brother Simao explained that after Domingus had been missing for around ten years, some members of the family wanted to make a grave as they were convinced that he was no longer alive. His mother refused:

*Many in the family decided to make a grave. We thought maybe he had died, and we didn’t want to get a punishment from the ancestors. The uncles said ‘it has been ten years.’ But my mother said ‘you cannot do that’, she felt he was still alive. So, we kept doing rituals so we could keep the plate open, to mention his name, so that he can find salvation.*

In a context where families lack information and assistance, ritual practices and prayer enabled them to find a semblance of hope and solace. Many described how on important religious days such as All Souls Day (*Loron Matebian*) they would enlist traditional leaders (Lia Nain) and ritual experts (Matan Do’ok) to interpret betel-nut leaves (*bua malus*) and chicken intestines, which would help determine whether the child was still alive. Others described dreams by family members in which

the spirits of the ancestors visited them to reassure them that the child was still alive. These rituals and experiences would allow them to keep the child's *bikan* (plate) 'open' at the table so that they could remain part of the family and receive ancestral protection. In none of these cases did families perform the ritual of *doku bikan* (turning of the plate to face downwards), which allows for 'closure after the death of a loved one by signifying that the deceased, their soul released, no longer eats at the family table' (Hearman 2018: 795).<sup>13</sup>

For example, Domingus' younger brother Simao described how, on significant days, Domingus' name would be ritually mentioned so that the ancestors would protect him, and food would be served on the open plate for him.

*On loron bo'ot, (significant days) about twice a year, we gave him food in the house. On the open plate. Then the younger siblings would eat it. If the food became cold very quickly that would mean he is dead, but it was not cold so we knew he was alive. On finado (All Souls Day) we would bua malu [conduct rituals with betelnut]. When we were going to visit the grave, we would bua malu and the Lia Nain (traditional leaders) would interpret it. They would say 'he is alive'. This would give my mother a big hope, force.*

However, these rituals did not provide complete reassurance to families. Rosa's cousin explained that Rosa's mother prayed to the ancestors to protect her lost child and conducted many rituals involving betelnut. While 'these rituals helped calm her, she needed to see her child with her own eyes.'

Even after the end of the occupation, most Timorese families did not have the economic resources or sufficient information to search for their children. There were some exceptions. Nina's mother related:

<sup>13</sup> There are however many other cases when families did perform this ritual and undertake mortuary rituals for the child. In these cases, reunions require the performance of additional, complex rituals to cancel the mortuary rituals.

*We never stopped searching for Nina, until her father had passed away in 2008. While he was alive, we sent letters to the military repeatedly. One commander was from Kupang, West Timor. He helped us send a letter. We got an answer that 'she's doing fine.' We sent another letter but there was never a reply. We asked as many military personnel as we could. One was named T. He was a Catholic. He came to our house and said, 'Your child walks with God, she is not dead.' Then he said, 'Don't think about her too much' (AJAR 2016b).*

Multiple efforts by her network of cousins, then studying in Indonesia, led to her discovery in 2008.

Domingus' family tried to look for him in Kupang, but were unable to find him. Domingus recounted:

*I once sent a letter to the local Los Palos Kodim (Military District Command) but there was no response. But after I went home (at the reunion), they told me they kept looking, they even went to the Kupang hospital to find out if there were any soldiers in the hospital with prosthetic legs like me. That's the story of my older siblings, they were also trying to find me, they even sent money through my stepmother, they told me because they knew that I was alive so they tried to look for me.*

In 2012, Bahrul's family was informed by the Ossu Mosque that he was still alive, but they could not find a way to search for him. Martina's family also received information from a former FALINTIL, Commander Lere Anan Timor, that she was alive.

### 3. The reunion and its lead-up: anticipation, anxiety and joy

When the stolen children were first contacted by AJAR and *Labarik Lakon* about participating in a reunification program, some were doubtful. After so many years of separation (in one case 42 years) and with limited information they were full of distrust. Some believed (or had been told) their family members were dead. They lacked accurate information and did not know if the

newly independent country of Timor Leste was stable. In the lead up to the reunification, phone calls and video calls with family members and photos gradually developed their trust. The involvement of former stolen children themselves in the process played an important role.

As Bahrul put it, 'in the beginning I was not so sure. I was scared it was a scam. I didn't believe. It was only when I did the video call [with my family] that I was convinced.' Rosa was also disbelieving, as her adoptive parents had told her that her biological parents had passed away. It was only when Nina provided her with photos and phone numbers that she was able to communicate with her family. She began to believe, and her hopes of meeting her family grew. Tito was unsure to begin with:

*At first, I was both believing and disbelieving ... Eventually, Nina came with [AJAR team] ... Their arrival was still very beautiful to me. We had a long conversation. As we talked, I started becoming more confident. About 75% of my doubts were cleared.*

Anti described how she was in a state of shock, after 42 years of believing she had no family. She fainted after talking with her father on the phone for the first time

Similarly, the Timorese families needed convincing that their children had been found after such a long time. In the case of Rosa, the family had already had the painful experience of a previous reunion with someone who turned out not to be Rosa. They did not want to be disappointed again. Over phone conversations, both Rosa and her family were reassured by the fact that Rosa had a distinctive scar on her head, the result of a childhood injury.

The children described feeling anxious in the lead-up to the reunion. This was compounded by administrative difficulties: many did not have the required documents for a passport. Although the children had lived a long time in Indonesia, many did not have citizenship papers. Further, the data was often inconsistent, especially if the children's names had been changed. This led to difficulties and delays with passport applications

(AJAR 2016a: 13). In some cases, AJAR relied on reference letters from Komnas Ham to expedite the process.

Despite this nervousness, the children described the reunions as an overwhelmingly positive experience.

As Bahrul describes:

*When I finally met my family, I was beyond happy ... I left Timor-Leste when I was ten years old and could only return after 22 years of separation. When I finally reached Timor-Leste and met them, I cried. They were all in good health, which allowed us to meet. I was incredibly happy to be able to hug and kiss my parents... People gathered around me, and some even thought I had passed away. My grandmother told me (she thought) I wouldn't come back.*

When she arrived home, Anti:

*Bowed to the land in gratitude because it had brought me back together with my parents who had been missing for 42 years.*

Nina describes how she had a real desire just to be held by her mother, to sit in her lap.

One of the first things many children did when returning to their home villages was to visit the graves of their family members, to lay flowers and light candles. They participated in rituals in which they were sprinkled with coconut water and had *tais* (traditional woven cloth) laid over their shoulders to signify their return to the family. Rosa describes how her family placed flowers in water and upon her return to the village she was immersed in the water and bathed with the flowers:

*When I finally came home (in May 2016), there was a celebration that lasted five days and four nights. Everywhere I went people wept. It was like I had been dead and had come to life again (AJAR 2016b).*

While the children did not always understand the significance of these rituals, for the Timorese families they were essential forms of reconnection, repair and renewal of disrupted cultural obligations. Tito's sister, Julieta, explained that when Tito came back to the

village it was necessary for him to be 'reintroduced' to the ancestors at the sacred houses and graves, to give thanks for keeping him safe. Traditional rituals involving killing pigs and chickens were needed to thank ancestors for their protection:

*When Tito arrived here, he followed the prayers and the blessing with coconut water and the Lia Nain (ritual leaders) called his name. This praying showed to our hamlet that the lost son had returned, and we clothed him with tais. The prayer was a form of welcoming him. The ritual leaders explained, 'even though you left the ancestors took care of you.' Then we sacrificed a goat, a chicken, and dog.*

Nina's cousin explained that when she returned:

*We received her with betel nut and tais. To coz fila fali (embrace once more). Before she entered the house, we sprinkled her with nu ben (coconut water). To hisik (cool). Because she was lost for a long time. This was to open the house for her again, so she can be welcomed.*

Those children converted to Islam said their families were very accepting. As Rosa explained:

*Even though I am Muslim, my family is very happy ... they prepared a place for me to pray and when they picked me up, they even wore a headscarf.*

Martina described how her family went out of their way to prepare special halal food for her and even made sure she woke in time for her dawn prayers.

*I'm grateful that my parents are still accepting, that's what I want: it's up to each person's beliefs.*

The children and the families described how, despite language barriers, they found ways to communicate. In some cases, members of the Timorese families spoke some Indonesian. Martina laughingly described with hand gestures how she and her family communicated.

*My aunt doesn't speak Indonesian very well. If she wants to ask me to drink and eat, she just goes like this [makes hand gestures].*

#### 4. After the reunion: the challenges of renewing relationships

Despite being welcomed with open arms, the reunions revived feelings of guilt amongst family members, and reawakened memories of the conflict and a sense of what had been lost. The children retained only snippets of memory of their former lives, their homes, their families, their mother tongue and their culture. Nina described how, before being reunited with her family, she could not remember her mother's name, only her father's. However, she still remembered a song her father used to sing, *Ro Dili seidauk mai* (the Dili ship hasn't arrived yet), and a few Tetum words, *fos* (rice) and *boek* (shrimp). She has slowly learned more.

It has been especially difficult for those whose parents have died. Martina embodies this sadness. Her aunt described how every time Martina telephones the family, she cries because she misses her mother. She can't bear to see her aunt's face because it reminds her of her mother. Rosa's parents died before they were able to see their daughter, making her deeply sad. In this way, the reunification has been a process not only of joy but also of grief.

There is also challenge of how to strengthen recently re-established and fragile relationships. While the children and families expressed a desire for a strong and ongoing connection with one another, they were aware of the many difficulties involved. As Anti put it:

*The reunion was like a soap opera where it suddenly ended. I gathered my money with great effort and returned [to Timor-Leste] again ...*

*When I returned to Indonesia, I wanted to come back. I almost died working so hard to save money. I was able to visit them again last year (2022).*

All respondents are in regular communication via telephone and WhatsApp. The availability of social media in both Timor-Leste and Indonesia allows for new forms of connection. However,

regular visits, while desired by all respondents (especially to attend significant events like weddings and funerals), are expensive. Since the reunions organized by AJAR, only some children have managed to raise funds for return visits. An added complication is that all but one of the children is now married, with children of their own. While they want to bring their spouses and children to Timor-Leste to build relationships with their grandparents and extended families, this is an added expense.

Some of the Timorese families expressed a desire for the children to return permanently. This is especially the case when the child is the eldest male (and, therefore, has customary responsibilities and rights to land). The children expressed more complicated feelings. As well as highlighting the many cultural, linguistic and economic challenges to returning, their narratives were imbued with a sense of divided identity and responsibility. Tito explained, 'my Timorese family wants me to go home, but my wife is Javanese. I could not bear to leave my wife and children.' As Bahrul explained:

*From the heart, I do want to return and stay there, but the conditions aren't favourable. My wife and children are here. They go to school here. It's possible but the children would have to adapt again to the language, the schooling and the environment. What's important is to live in Indonesia and be able to visit my parents there.*

Anti described a similar sense of feeling torn, of divided loyalties:

*'I am still confused. If my husband dies first, maybe I will go back to Timor. My mother calls me to come home to Timor. She says, 'you should die in Timor not Indonesia.'*

Similarly, Rosa explains 'I really want to [move back to Timor] but my children don't want to.

Out of the eight stolen children, only one, Yanto, has returned to Timor-Leste to live. However, this had not been an easy process – after growing up in the cities of Indonesia, he did not want to live in his family's quiet rural village.

Living in Dili with limited skills, he has struggled to find employment and is considering moving back to Indonesia.

*People look at my name, Muhammad Yanto, and say that is not a Timorese name. Although my real name is Julião Soares. Now I sell noodles and juice in Farol, and help out with cooking at a canteen. Staff from the local NGOs usually have lunch here. Thank God now I can make just enough money (Wandita 2020).*

Domingus had also attempted to move back. His brother, Simao, expressed the family's desire to have him return:

*We heard that Domingus' life in Indonesia is difficult. He does not have a good income to support his family's life there. This makes us feel very sad.*

*When Domingus came home during the reunion in 2015, his father had already passed away. As the oldest son among the siblings, our extended family felt that he was the father figure we were missing.*

Unfortunately, he is not able to return to Timor-Leste without financial assistance:

*In 2017, I tried to move back to Timor-Leste. I took my wife and children to the border. We tried to make a living there, but after 6 months we gave up. We couldn't make it financially. And it was hard not being able to speak Tetun.*

Some of the children expressed uncertainty about the expectations of their Timorese families. A particular concern related to their lack of knowledge of their customary responsibilities. Tito explained how, as the eldest son, he had handed over his customary responsibilities to his cousin in a special ceremony. But he described a sense of sadness and guilt for letting these responsibilities go. As the only son of his father's first wife, Domingus was also concerned about how he would uphold his customary responsibilities, for instance in relation to his role in death rituals which, he suggested, his family would not permit him to relinquish. He wanted to hand these responsibilities to his younger brother, but his younger brother would not allow this.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *To the governments of Indonesia and Timor-Leste*

Both the families and the children included in this study were profoundly grateful for having had the opportunity to re-establish relationships after a long period of separation. Their key recommendation was for the reunion program to continue so that other Timorese families can be reunited. Ongoing communications and visits between the children and their Timorese families suggest that the reunions could play an important role in strengthening economic, social and cultural ties between the two nations. Recognising this, the governments of Timor-Leste and Indonesia should provide more support, in particular:

- More government support needed for civil society efforts to trace and reunify children and their families, and to provide long-term assistance. Ongoing support is needed for the children and their families to remain in contact, and to allow the children to regularly visit Timor-Leste, along with their spouses and children. This might include: travel stipends for multiple visits and longer visas or residential status for stolen children and their families who wish to visit or live in Timor-Leste. Similarly for Timorese families who wish to visit Indonesia (allowing them to work and access services, for example). Support should also include economic and language assistance for those stolen children and their families wishing to return permanently.
- Stolen children are unlikely to possess birth certificates and other identity papers needed to apply for passports. Although AJAR and the *Labarik Lakon* Working Group help survivors overcome these hurdles, the Indonesian government needs to adopt a proactive approach. Training and information for immigration officers assessing these

applications is required. The Timor-Leste government should consider providing stolen children with official documents certifying their place and date of birth, recognizing them as victims of human rights violations, with a special status signifying their right to citizenship and residency in Timor-Leste.

- The Indonesian government must acknowledge the wrongful policies and practices that enabled thousands of children to be abducted from their families, based on the findings of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) and Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF). The Indonesian government should consider granting dual citizenship to the stolen children and their families. While the Timor-Leste constitution permits dual citizenship and recognises children with Timorese parents as Timorese, Indonesia does not yet permit dual citizenship.
- The Indonesian government should support the dissemination of accurate information about the stolen children, the relevant findings and recommendations of the two truth commissions, as well as accurate updates on Timor-Leste and its relations with Indonesia, especially through local officials dealing with Timorese communities in Indonesia.

### *To Komnas HAM, Komnas Perempuan, PDHJ and CNC*

- Together with civil society, design mechanisms to facilitate reunion visits for greater numbers of stolen children. The mechanisms could be implemented by civil society groups from the two countries working with relevant government and international agencies (e.g., ICRC, IOM, or UN bodies). These bilateral mechanisms could facilitate voluntary family meetings, while responding to reports concerning missing persons.

- Develop a bilateral public enquiry on the stolen children and other disappeared persons in response to the recommendation of the CTF that states: “that in respect for those who have suffered or were affected by the human rights violations of 1999 and before, including those placed in detention, killed and disappeared, appropriate programs are needed for their families.”<sup>14</sup> The inquiry must conduct research on root-causes and make recommendations for accountability and non-recurrence.
- The *Centro Nacional Chega!*, working with civil society should develop a register for Timorese families with missing children and disappeared family members. This process needs to be survivor-centred, meaning created and implemented together with survivors, integrating trauma-healing and empowering approaches. It needs to be adequately resourced and to support victims’ associations who have significant knowledge of families with missing persons in their geographical areas.
- Komnas Perempuan, working with civil society, develop a special program to understand the gender-issues faced by stolen children, and empower survivors to become agents of change.

### **To Islamic and Christian education institutions and the Indonesian military**

- Make archives and records more transparent and accessible to assist Timorese families and stolen children seeking information.

### **For civil society**

- With support and cooperation between two governments, create a mechanism to facilitate reunion visits for a greater number of stolen children in a timely fashion (for instance, through a ‘rolling’ program of reunifications). Continue to make use of and strengthen strategies using social media platforms that Timorese families are using to look for their children.
- Civil society should continue to involve ‘stolen children’ in the tracing and reunification program. This is an important mechanism not only for locating other children, but also for building trust and countering misinformation.

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## ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

In July 2023, AJAR conducted two participatory workshops in Bali, Indonesia and Dili, Timor-Leste, consecutively.

This action research used the body mapping exercise, part of a set of tools developed by AJAR in both conflict and post-conflict contexts. [See AJAR's *Unlearning Impunity Manual* series, including "[Mosaic: A manual for rebuilding lives and communities after torture](#)," and "[Stone and Flower: A guide to understanding and action for women survivors](#)."] Additionally, we referred to the methodology developed by a human rights advocate from South Africa, Shirley Gunn, outlined in her book "[Body Mapping for Advocacy: A Toolkit](#)."<sup>14</sup>

15 Shirley Gunn conducted a remote training on this body-mapping methodology to AJAR in 2020.



A bodymap of one of the stolen children from a workshop conducted in Bali, Indonesia, July 2023. Adapted from a methodology by human rights advocate Shirley Gunn, the bodymap depicts a life story from childhood through the aftermath of reunion and her hopes for the future. © Asia Justice and Rights

### Workshop with the Stolen Children (Indonesia)

After introductions and expectations sessions, participants were asked to trace their bodies on paper, write their name/s (both original and changed names) and reflect on the questions provided for each section. They were asked to draw symbols, or write key-words on their body map, as they reflected on their experiences. For many who were not comfortable with writing or drawing, a facilitator may be asked assist in writing/drawing as requested. The body-maps were shared among the participants, at the end of each session.

## 1. Memories of Childhood

- Where and when were you born? Who were your parents? Siblings?
- What memories do you have of East Timor?
- What games did you play? Pets? What food did you

## 2. Moved to Indonesia

- Do you have any memories of leaving East Timor? If so, what do you remember about this process and the key actors involved? How did you feel then?
- How did you travel to Indonesia?
- Experiences of growing up in Indonesia. What were the good things? What were the bad things? What did you know of your background? How did you come to realise you had been separated from your family? Did you stay in contact in some way?
- Did you feel different being a Timorese child among Indonesian children?
- Did you get an opportunity to go to school? Did you change religions? What were your feelings around that?
- Experiences of growing to adulthood. What was good about your life, what was not so good?
- Before you were contacted by AJAR/Labarik Lakon working group, had you tried to contact your biological family or return to Timor-Leste? How?

## 3. Contact with AJAR and meeting family

- What were your feelings when first contacted by the working group? What were your hopes and fears about meeting East Timorese family.
- What did you do to prepare for the meeting? What helped you?
- What assistance did AJAR/Labarik Lakon working group provide? What are your views about this?

- What were your feelings when reunited with East Timorese family? Return to East Timor for the reunion? Experiences of visiting home village again.

## 4. After the reunion

- Has anything changed in your life since the reunion? If so, what?
- What sort of contact do you have with your East Timorese family? How regular? If not regular, why not?
- Have you faced any communication challenges? How do you address these? Any other challenges?
- Have you been back to East Timor to visit since the reunion? Why or why not?
- Would you consider living in East Timor? Why or why not?
- Has the reunion changed your understanding of yourself? If so, how?
- Has it changed the way you feel about Indonesia? If so, in what way?
- Has it impacted on your religious beliefs?
- What kind of relationship would you like to have with your East Timorese family now?
- What kind of support would help you with this?
- Do you have any recommendations to AJAR/Labarik Lakon working group to inform its future activities?
- Do you have any recommendations to the governments of Timor-Leste or Indonesia?
- What do your past experiences mean to you, your family and community?

## Workshop with the families (Timor-Leste)

After introductions and expectations sessions where facilitators explained the aim of the research, participants were asked to trace their bodies on paper, write their name/s (in some cases more than 1 family member participated. Also, we included the name and photograph of

the stolen child in this exercise) and reflect on the questions provided for each section. They were asked to draw symbols, or write key-words on their body map, as they reflected on their experiences. For many who were not comfortable with writing or drawing, a facilitator may be asked assist in writing/ drawing as requested. The body-maps were shared among the participants, at the end of each session.

## 1. Experiences of abduction and responses

- What are your memories of your missing/ abducted relative
- What are your memories of abduction. Under what circumstances was your child/family member abducted (i.e. displacement-based separation/disappearance, direct approach by military). Who were the actors involved?
- Were there any agreements, written or otherwise, made?
- What did you do after your child/relative was abducted (e.g., attempt to trace them? If so, how? How long did you search? Did you decide to make a grave? If so, how long after the abduction and why did you do that? Did you conduct any rituals?)
- Did you approach anyone or any institutions to help trace your child? (e.g., the local priest? Church? Village chief/Chefe de suco?) What did they do?

## 2. Contact with AJAR and reunion

- What were your experiences/feelings when first contacted by AJAR/working group?
- What were your hopes and concerns about meeting with your child/relative?

- What did you do to prepare for the meeting? What helped you?
- What are your views on AJAR/working group's assistance in preparing for the meeting.
- What were your experiences of reunion
- What were your experiences/feelings about taking child/relative back to home village.
- Were any special rituals conducted? What for?

## 3. After the meeting

- What kind of contact do you now have with your child/relative How regular? If you don't have contact, why?
- Have you faced any difficulties communicating with your child/relative? What sort of difficulties?
- Has your child/relative been back to visit your family since the first meeting? Why or why not?



A bodymap of one of the stolen children from a workshop conducted in Dili, Timor-Leste, July 2023. Adapted from a methodology by human rights advocate Shirley Gunn, the bodymap depicts a life story from childhood through the aftermath of reunion and her hopes for the future. © Asia Justice and Rights

- Has the meeting changed the way you feel about yourself/your identity? If so, how?
- Has it changed your relationship with your family? If so, how?
- What kind of relationship would you like to have with your child/relative now? What kind of support do you feel would help you with this?

- Do you have any recommendations to AJAR/ working group to inform its future activities?
- Do you have any recommendations to the governments of Timor-Leste and Indonesia?
- What do your past experiences mean to you, your family and community?

## ANNEX 2: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF SURVEY WITH THE STOLEN CHILDREN

In 2023, members of the *Labarik Lakon* working group conducted a survey with 23 survivors [17 men, and 5 women] in Indonesia, asking questions about the experiences of being separated from their families, growing up in Indonesia, their reunion and their reflections on its impact. These **preliminary findings** provide a broader view of the experiences of stolen children who have participated in this study. AJAR hopes to continue this survey in early 2024 to cover more survivors. At the moment, our key findings include:

- 16 out of 23 (69%) participants of the survey stated that they were taken by Indonesian military or official , with 4 (17%) brought by educational foundations, and 3 persons (13%) taken by individuals. Only 2 out of 23 (8%) thought that their parents or guardians gave some kind of consent, while the majority (73%) did not know the circumstances of their being taken to Indonesia, and 4 persons (16%) knew that their guardians were forced to accept their children being taken away.
- From the 23 participants of our survey, only 1 person described a happy and secure childhood with their adoptive family. Seven participants of the survey said that their

childhood was full of suffering (33%), two experienced violence, while thirteen persons described their childhood as a mix between happiness and sadness.

- All 23 participants of our survey described their first contact with the Working Group and subsequent reunion as a happy event. Similarly, they all believed that the Working Group's efforts were very helpful. 17 out of the 23 (73%) felt positively transformed by the reunion with their family members in Timor-Leste, whereas 6 (26%) thought that, at the end, their lives remained the same.
- 15 out of 23 (65%) of the participants of the survey, say that they continue to be in contact with their families in Timor-Leste, while the remaining 8 (34%) express that they are only able to be in touch once in a while. Sixteen of the 23 (69%) have not returned to Timor-Leste, since the reunion, whereas 6 persons (26%) have found a way to visit their families again. However, the majority of participants of the survey wanted to return permanently to Timor-Leste: 6 (26%) affirmed they really wanted to return permanently to Timor-Leste, whereas 11 (47%) desired the same, but have many issues to consider. Out of the 23, only five persons (21%) were clear that they did not want to permanently return to Timor-Leste, and one person was undecided.