

BE KIDS

Recce to Timor-Leste

23–28 MAY 2009

At 7.15am on Saturday May 23 2009, after a flight of just a little more than an hour from Darwin, we arrived at Dili Airport to be met by Margaret and David Hall (FPET: Friends and Partners of East Timor), Maria and Artur (members of their team).

Margaret, an experienced community health nurse, and Dave had lived in Broome for many years and were now in Timor-Leste with FPET, an organisation funded through the Gap Parish in Queensland and with which we made contact after watching a program on Major Michael Stone (*Australian Story*). Michael has lived and worked in Dili for a while as advisor to the President of the Republic, speaks fluent Tetum and is across most of what occurs in Timor-Leste.



On the road to Atabae

Michael in turn connected us with his father Gary Stone who is the Chaplain for the Australian Defence Force and the Australian Police Force and also deacon at the Gap Parish. We could not have asked for better contacts. We were made to feel so welcome and their generosity of spirit and goodwill was palpable.



(L-R) Elsie Toh, David Hall, Maria, Artur, Lepa and Margaret Hall

The drive into Dili town is a reminder of Bali 20 years ago. There is evidence that in Dili itself tourism infrastructure is beginning to develop. There is quite a lot of construction taking place. Traffic is a bit chaotic but quite manageable. The presence of the United Nations vehicles and personnel, police on secondment from Australia, New Zealand and numerous nations of the world gave an atmosphere of calm and reassurance. We did not feel any anxiety as to our security at any time.

That night we had dinner at sunset with the FPET team which now included Felicidade “Lepa”. We luxuriated on the beach front that stretches the length of the city virtually from the airport to the statue of Christo Rei, a figure of Christ high on a hill. A popular activity for resident expatriates, meals were not cheap and are priced in US\$. There is a sense that the country's

economy is unsustainable in what is referred to as “a UN Economy”.

After a night as guests at the FPET team house in Dili, we met with Gary Stone. We were so invigorated by his enthusiasm and love for the nation and its people. He welcomed **Be Kids** and assured us that FPET would assist in any way. After that, we left Dili for Atabae, a two and a half hour journey into the hills.



Relaxing with the team at the Sol d'Mar at sunset

The road to Atabae skirts the coastline for much of the way, sometimes only metres from the ocean's edge, before ascending into the mountains offering panoramic views of Timor-Leste's beautiful landscape. The road was mostly narrow and often potholed with numerous hairpin bends. The ruggedness filled us with a pioneering spirit, a reminder that we were in one of the world's newest nations after almost a decade of unrest in the wake of independence.

We bridged a few broad and dry river beds which, we were told, is cut off in the rainy season floods that come with the extremely heavy run-off from the mountain tops. There are tiny villages along the way but it is evident that this country is not prepared for tourists. Both in Dili and along the journey we could see the ruins of

firebombed buildings, a reminder of the violence and hardships that scar the nation.

We arrived into Atabae in the evening, armed to the brim with supplies. There are no shops of any significance in the village so most things have to be brought in. The small roads of the village are relatively well laid out with a market area with people going about their lives in a relaxed yet purposeful way. The villagers depend on what they grow for their survival.

Infrastructure is minimal. We washed with water from a well and electricity is intermittent between 7pm and 10pm. It is fortunate that our hosts have their own generator, and 3 cats that kept rodents away.

The next day we visited the FPET supported Atabae Community Health Centre that was built by FPET and operated by the Halls and their team. We spent a remarkable morning, witnessing young mothers with their babies coming for preventative health checkups and teaching sessions. Infant mortality is high. Illnesses from malnutrition and lack of sanitation are prevalent.



A village shop



The Hall Residence -- we were the guests in the "Ambassador Suite"!

Thanks to our donors, McKenzie's Chemists in Mount Lawley, Dr N Partridge and Christine and Joe Nonis, we were able to provide vitamins, food supplements and worming medication for children and mothers.

We then drove with Dave and Lepa to a village called Limanaro where Lepa is from. It is about an hour away along a very bumpy road. Lepa brought us to the school she attended between the age of 5 and 10. After this she went to the school in Atabae which meant that she would have to walk a round trip of 4 hours a day to complete her primary school before going to Dili to finish her secondary education. Her contribution as a community nursing assistant comes highly commended by all – a real inspiration.



Margaret with Maria, Lepa and a mother at a weekly check at the Community Health Centre



The FPET Atabae Community Health Centre

We learned from Lepa and Mr Octovianus Laisbuke of the problems caused by lack of nutrition, worming issues and the absence of amenities and facilities experienced by this small community. **Be Kids** can partner the Limanaro community and FPET to provide for the children at this little school with the following:

- (a) twenty desk and 2 chair sets at a cost of US\$25 each set;
- (b) books, pencils and other educational supplies;
- (c) clothing;
- (d) shoes; and importantly
- (e) extend the FPET community health programme from Atabae to take care of the children's health issues.

The reasons for this recommendation:

- (a) the need is evident;
- (b) villages like Limanaro do not enjoy the largesse of donations from usual charities;
- (c) we were inspired by Lepa's attitude and achievements and the values that education has had in her life;
- (d) FPET already has a successful presence in Atabae and any work we undertake in Limanaro can serve to enhance this presence;
- (e) Margaret and her team have agreed to oversee the supervision of the extension of the health care programme;
- (f) Dave has agreed to administer the supplies that we provide;
- (g) The desks and chairs are to be built by the community;
- (h) The financial contribution aspect of this project is low;
- (i) There is a strong potential to expand the educational and health provisions as we progress; and
- (j) Our exit at a later date will not cause a major vacuum.



Felicidade "Lepa"

We discussed the possible parameters of our involvement with Margaret, Dave and their team. We were particularly touched by the gratitude that Lepa displayed. At this stage, this project can be funded by funds already donated or raised by our members.

On our return to Dili after 2 days in Atabae region, we met with Transformation Alliance, a worldwide charity with a major Singaporean involvement and were impressed by the number of young volunteers that they had in many districts. We shared experiences and were confident that there could be cross-pollination in the future if we wished.

We were also privileged to go on the ward round with Dr Dan Murphy, a highly respected volunteer doctor who has given a large part of his life to work with the people of Timor-Leste, seeing about 300 out-patients a day and training locals to work with the in-patients at the Biaro Pite Clinic – a never-ending tour of love. The main diseases are malaria, dengue fever and tuberculosis.



Some of the 91 children that attend the Limanaro Primary School



Inside one of the two classrooms at the Limanaro Primary School



Limanaro Primary School



School children drinking at the spring

We spent the remainder of our last day familiarising ourselves with the town, getting to know prices, types of goods on sale, accommodation options and types of handicrafts made by local groups.

We left early on Thursday 28 May 2009, understanding a little better the needs of this nation of friendly and gentle people, feeling happy to have made new friends and very positive about the future for **Be Kids** in Timor-Leste.

Recce attended by Elsie Toh and Joan Peters.