

Julie Michelle Klinger and Emma Gaalaas Mullaney, geographers doing research on women veterans of armed struggles, explain the international controversy over human rights tribunals in East Timor and one former guerilla’s call for forgiveness. (661 words)

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To Forgive a Genocide by Emma Mullaney & Julie Klinger

“They told us that if we voted, they would burn us alive,” recalls Madalena Soares, a veteran of the Timorese Resistance. “I remember thinking, maybe they really will kill us all. But it is better to vote and die than to keep living like this.” In measured tones, she speaks of the end of a twenty-four year occupation of her tiny island nation. From 1975 to 1999, the Indonesian military killed one third of the population of East Timor, over 200,000 people, and displaced over 75% of those who survived.

On August 30, 1999, in a referendum conducted under UN authority, the Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence. But the transfer of power was not peaceful. As they withdrew, the Indonesians killed an estimated 1,500 Timorese and destroyed 75% of the country’s infrastructure, forcing more than 300,000 people to flee their homes.

Ten years later, the government of this newly independent country has attempted to present a united front to the rest of the world, building policies on ideas of “reconciliation” and “amnesty,” arguing that concrete development is a more urgent priority than abstract legal accountability. Yet among the Timorese people there remains profound anger toward those responsible for crimes against humanity. The country faces a legacy of bloodshed and also deepening economic dependence on its former occupier; last year almost half of East Timor’s imported goods came from Indonesia. After weighing its options, amidst heavy criticism, the

national government has chosen to pursue working relationships rather than prosecute the Indonesian military, their Western backers, or Timorese collaborators.

On the recent anniversary of the vote for independence, President Jose Ramos-Horta called for an end to demands for a human rights tribunal. His approach treads dangerously close to absolving the perpetrators of genocide in a gamble to build on tenuous diplomatic relations with Indonesia. Many Timorese organizations backed by Amnesty International reject this position, arguing that it fosters a culture of impunity. These deepening divisions point to a global problem of how best to address human rights abuses, one reflected in recent headlines from across the world, from Cambodia to Bosnia, from Kenya to Iraq.

Madalena's voice stands out in the debate over where to go from here, which has reached rare international prominence in the weeks surrounding the anniversary. She demands that the groups representing her people stop squandering time and resources fighting over policies of collaboration versus accountability. She sees both as essential to the process of reconciliation. In her experience, forgiveness is a means to justice.

For Madalena, forgiving does not mean forgetting. It means granting those who have done her wrong an opportunity to redeem themselves. "They came once to burn down my house," she explains, "I invited them in, offered them what I had, and treated them with dignity. I even offered them the lighter, and they saw that they did not have the courage. I was unafraid and showed them patience, and they repented."

Many of us in more peaceful parts of the world remain oblivious to the struggles of those like Madalena. She and other female veterans tend to be overlooked by national and international programs and their voices go unheard. Yet these women shoulder responsibility for advocacy and welfare in their villages. Madalena fosters a dozen children whose parents, maddened by trauma and sorrow, can no longer care for them. Her daily hardship and public service receive no official support or recognition, nor did her many years of fighting for the freedom of her country. But she finds little solace in anger or vengeance.

In the words of Madalena: "Forgiveness is the only way the Timorese people can win. We can move forward only if we work together and learn to trust each other." It is a strategy by which to achieve a just and peaceful democracy, not only on the island of Timor, but in countless other areas of conflict, moving us closer to a world that can make us both safe and proud.

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