

# Rebuilding the press

**'Journalism in East Timor, now, in the absence of oppression and repression calls for a new way of looking at things and a new way of writing. But because it is more difficult to do, our journalists need better training. We must be honest, fair, accurate and not swing madly at the bad guys.'**

By **SONNY INBARAJ**

METHA GUTERRES could not hide his joy when he saw three printing presses being unloaded in November 1999 from shipping containers in East Timor's main Dili port. In a country where almost 70 per cent of the physical infrastructure had been destroyed by pro-Indonesia militias, these printing machines were a ray of hope for the revival of a newspaper in the first new state of the 21st century.

"My colleagues and me can now get to work setting up a print shop," said the news editor and production chief of the former *Suara Timor Timur* ("Voice of East Timor") daily, who was helping to load the printing machines, donated by the Australia-based Timor Aid, on to a three-tonne truck.

"The militias might have destroyed East Timor but they haven't killed our spirit. We'll publish the first free and fair East Timorese newspaper in the new millennium," said Guterres as the printing machines attracted curious onlookers among the Australian troops in the multinational armed force, guarding the port.

Journalists on *Suara Timor Timur*, East Timor's only daily newspaper and known affectionately as "Tim Tim", have been used to threats. But things started to get really serious in March 1999.

On March 26, about 20 members of the Indonesia-supported militia group Mahidi stormed into the newspaper's office, in downtown Dili, and threatened

to burn down the building as punishment for the newspaper's "antagonistic" reporting. Although the paper gave space to both pro-Indonesia and pro-independence voices, militia members accused the daily's staff of stirring conflict. On April 17, four truck loads of militia members attacked and destroyed the newspaper office. They smashed up computers, printing machines, archival cabinets, windows and doors, accusing the paper of being a voice for anti-Indonesia voices.

When pro-Indonesia militias went on an orgy of killing and destruction in Dili and elsewhere in East Timor after the announcement on September 4 of the outcome of a United Nations-held ballot on the future of the territory, the building of *Suara Timor Timur* was burnt. The outcome of the August 30 poll favoured separation from Indonesia by an overwhelming 78.5 per cent, against 21.5 per cent opting to remain with Indonesia but with broad autonomy.

"I feel very sad whenever I see my old newspaper office. It was a part of me and now it's completely destroyed," said Guterres as the truck with the printing machines made its way to a warehouse. But like everything else in East Timor that must be rebuilt, reviving a printing press as a prelude to starting a newspaper in East Timor is no easy task.

Explained Guterres: "Newsprint stocks have all been destroyed, coupled with the fact that supply from the Indonesian city of Surabaya is no longer available because of the diplomatic strain in relationships between East Timor and Indonesia."

"Alternative supplies from Darwin (500 kilometres away) are too expensive and freight costs from northern Australia are exorbitant," he added.

Guterres also said the power supply in Dili is still too low to run printing machines and the presses risked being damaged if they were operated under present circumstances.

But the need to inform and report in East Timor still remains urgent.

"There is a news vacuum here and rumours thrive because there are no newspapers," said Virgilio da Silva of *Talitakum* — an underground pro-independence news magazine.

"Gossip through the grapevine can be damaging to nation-building," he stressed.

East Timorese journalists, said da Silva, only returned to Dili early in November after fleeing the militias.

"The bulk of journalists, either with *Suara Timor Timur* or the various student publications, were targeted by the militias. Many fled to Kupang, West

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Timor's capital, Jakarta or Bali. Those that stayed back with their families, in Dili, fled to the hills in Dare," said da Silva. In early September, da Silva was feared killed by the militias after he went missing.

"I hid in the mountains and survived by eating leaves and roots. I reminded myself everyday that I had to stay alive to continue my work as a journalist," he said.

But journalism in a new East Timor, in transition, calls for a shift in traditional practices.

"Practices instituted by the Indonesian regime will have to be broken. Local mainstream journalists cannot expose corruption if they have been used to accepting freebies and envelopes from interested parties," said Hugo da Costa, former managing editor of *Suara Timor Timur*.

"It is a universal media rule that the media remain independent. There can be no compromise in East Timor," added da Costa.

He explained: "In the quest to report on the truth and inform the public in a free and fair manner — amidst the presence of the UN, multilateral lending agencies, corporate 'carpet-baggers' and the burgeoning East Timorese leadership — local reporters cannot be beholden to any party, individual or government."

"Problems will abound in East Timor with the large flow of international aid money and there is a compulsion on local journalists to report on them without fear or favour," added da Costa.

A session to initiate face-to-face consultations with mainstream and activist journalists is planned next month in Dili.

"Journalism in East Timor, now, in the absence of oppression and repression calls for a new way of looking at things and a new way of writing. But because it is more difficult to do, our journalists need better training," said Guterres. "In the course of building a democratic society, we must be honest, fair, accurate and not swing madly at the bad guys (the captured militias)."

□ *Sonny Inbaraj is a Darwin-based correspondent for the Inter Press Service. This report, under the title "EAST TIMOR: Journalists Rebuild Media As Well", was published by IPS on 22 November 1999. he is assisting with the rebuilding of the East Timor media. Email: ausasia@ozemail.com.au*