

SUPPORTING GRASS ROOTS LEGAL SERVICES IN EAST TIMOR

Earlier this year Darwin Community Legal Centre (DCLS) initiated a national project to support the continued existence and development of small community based legal aid and advocacy organisations in East Timor. The project has been endorsed by the National Association of Community Legal Centres and is well underway. While legal centres are traditionally rich in energy and enthusiasm, what we lack is the cash to make volunteer projects such as these bear fruit. *Can your firm help?*

The idea

Community legal centre (CLC) workers around Australia have been actively involved in a private capacity and in varying degrees in the East Timorese cause. However there had not been a coordinated response from Australian CLCs, as there had been from other sectors of the legal profession.

An initial idea raised by members of the National Association was to sponsor several East Timorese lawyers/advocates to attend the next national conference to be held in Perth in 2001. As we heard more about the situation in East Timor from those working there, we realised there was scope to do more and the plan grew.

DCLS was in a perfect position to initiate such a project. Events in East Timor have always had significant resonance for the people of Darwin. Because of our physical proximity there has developed a strong historical link between the independence movement and activists and supporters in Darwin. When the army opened fire on unarmed civilians at the Santa Cruz cemetery in 1991, the horror and grief amongst Darwin protesters was palpable. It was to Darwin that the bulk of temporary refugees fleeing the violence in the days following the '99 vote, sought refuge. Darwin streets continue to be filled with the uniforms of UN soldiers on leave, a constant reminder of the extensive international effort occurring just north of our border.

The release of the report by the Northern Territory branch of the ICJ in March this

year (see March edition of *Balance*) on ways the Australian legal community could assist in the reconstruction of a legal system in East Timor gave further impetus to the idea of getting the CLC community on board. While highlighting the enormity of the task at hand and the need for assistance at almost every level of the nascent justice system, the report identified, as one of its nine recommendations, a role for the Australian profession in assisting with the establishment of legal aid system and the Public Defender's Office in East Timor.

Aim of project

The aim of this project is to forge links between community legal centres across Australia (via the National Association of Community Legal Centres) and community based legal aid and advocacy organisations in East Timor, with a view to establishing support projects to enable the latter's continued role in the emerging justice system, as appropriate.

Those of us familiar with the history of the development of legal aid in Australia will be aware that the emergence of a state funded scheme of legal assistance coincided with the development of free legal services provided pro bono by lawyers and advocates operating out of small community based centres. Some would even say these early CLCs pre dated the first Australian Legal Office.

This marriage has remained an effective feature of the legal aid system in Australia. DCLS identified that it could play a role in finding out what grass roots human rights and advocacy organisations already existed in East Timor, what their role in the emerging legal aid system would be and what assistance from Australia may help to support local East Timorese efforts to build community based legal aid systems.

To that end Catherine Caruana travelled to Dili for a week in late March as a representative of DCLS and met with workers from a range of organisations. The report resulting from this visit contains a profile of the various bodies and the areas in which assistance is sought and can be found at the DCLS website at [http://](http://www.dcls.org.au/etimor)

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Suggested assistance

We aim to develop strong networks with around five sister organisations in East Timor and to provide practical assistance to help them to continue with the great work they are doing in difficult circumstances. Some of the needs identified by the people Ms Caruana met with include equipment such as computers, printers, modems, virus protection and software, generators, UPS, circuit breakers, office furniture, phones and motorbikes for transport to clients in outlying districts.

Ten IBM computers have been donated for which we need to purchase monitors, CD drives, modems, software as well as cover the cost of transport from Sydney to Darwin/Dili.

Professional and other training was also identified as a need. As such we will be trying to secure places on bar reader's courses, English courses, mediation training and computer training. Basic needs such as access to law books, most of which were destroyed or removed by the outgoing Indonesian forces

There's a lot of direct assistance work we can do in sharing the skills of CLC workers in community legal education, community development, law reform, campaigning, the development of free legal advice services etc. We are currently trying to seek funding to sponsor ten young Timorese lawyers to attend the National Association of CLCs annual conference in September in Perth.

We Need You

We desperately need funds to assist us make the aims of this project a reality. If you support the role played by community legal services in Australia, please help us to support our sister organisations in East Timor in the one way we *cannot* i.e. financially. Donations can be made to the:

East Timor Support Fund
C/o Darwin Community Legal Service
PO Box 3180 Darwin NT 0801
To find out more, please contact
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