

Timor-Leste's stolen children come home

Despite their grief, 'lost' kids stubbornly refuse to forget their identity as they struggle to reconstruct their past



East Timorese families attend a political gathering in Aileu on April 15. Soldiers snatched scores of kids during the conflict with Indonesia at the end of the last century. Now they hope to be reunited with their families. (Photo by Valentino Dariell De Sousa/AFP)

**Mary Aileen Bacalso, Manila
Timor Leste**

April 24, 2018

In predominantly Catholic Timor-Leste, which is battling an exploding population, an estimated 4,500 children were plucked from the bosom of their families and taken to Indonesia over two decades ago. Now they are trying to come home.

The exodus of those children from their homeland occurred at the height of a series of violent conflicts between separatist groups and the Indonesian military from 1974 to 1999.

A report by the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation noted that the widespread practice of removing children from their homes "displayed a mindset that by taking control of Timor-Leste's territory, Indonesia also gained unfettered control over its children."

Indonesia soldiers, and even civilians in power in Timor-Leste, felt that they were entitled to take an East Timorese child home without their parents' permission.

In 2015, I was fortunate to have personally witnessed the most humanly gratifying outcome every human rights worker on the theme of enforced disappearances can have: the identification and reunification of long disappeared children, now adults, with their biological families.

There were 14 of them taking the plane from Indonesia to the now independent country of Timor-Leste to meet, for the first time in decades, with their long lost families.

On that day, poignant stories were told by the children of Timor-Leste, one of the newest members of the United Nations and a state party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Theirs were stories of grief and longing, of refusal to forget their identity, of child labor, of sexual exploitation, of poverty and lack of education, of remembering and reconstructing historical memories.

Isabelinha Pinto was taken from her parents at the tender age of five. A soldier took her because he had no daughter.

In Indonesia, Isabelinha did not forget what her father told her: "You have to be strong, honest and brave." She took her father's word to heart, and survived. A cousin found her.

After reunifying with her parents, Isabelinha volunteered to find other children like her. She became instrumental in facilitating the search for Timorese children in Indonesia.

Victor da Costa, who works for Indonesian human rights group Kontras, was taken from his home

in Timor when he was 4 years old.

When he came of age, he went back to Timor-Leste only to find that he had already been declared dead, thus a ritual had to be performed for his soul to return from the dead.

"I had mixed feelings of sadness and anger when I learned that I already had my own grave," he said.

A study titled "Long Journey Home" includes the testimonies of 65 children who were reunified with their parents. They speak of alienation and constant longing, of deception of their changed identities; of the trauma of war, of slavery, torture, and ill treatment, and of the challenges of reunification.

Marco Antonio Garavito Fernandez, director of the Liga Guatemalteca de Higiene Mental of Guatemala, emphasized the utmost importance of mending broken hearts of both the children and their biological families.

On the day when the 14 stolen children were coming home from Indonesia, Marco made paper cutouts of hearts. One piece of each of the hearts was given to family members who were waiting for their disappeared loved ones. The other pieces were with the children.

When the pieces of the hearts were put together, indelible scars remain, but the broken hearts were one again.

Various groups in Timor-Leste and Indonesia have been working hard to find the truth and facilitate the much-needed healing of surviving stolen children and their families.

In ferreting out the truth, in attaining justice, in facilitating the much-needed healing and reparation, both Timor-Leste and Indonesia must assert the power of memory against forgetting.

Addressing human rights violations during the Indonesian occupation can lead to the healing of wounds, however difficult, and stop the bleeding in Timor-Leste. It could be the most precious gift to the children.

Searching for them is a sacred act that both civil society organizations and the governments of Indonesia and Timor-Leste must continue struggling for.

<https://www.ucanews.com/news/timor-lestes-stolen-children-come-home/82103>