

**Presentation Title:** Finding the Stolen Children of Timor Leste

**Presentation Time: 1**2:00 – 1:30 PM AEDT

**Content Level:** Intermediate

**Potential to Distress:** No

**Abstract**:

“We arrived in Jakarta in 1993 or 1994; we were put in a foundation. Then a man came and said he would take my sister so she could go to school in Medan [North Sumatra]...We had to pay to go to school, and a Timorese businessman said that he would pay. That was about 1995 or 1996, but then he went away. My brother was moved to Bandung; I don’t know where. I was moved there too, we ended up in the same school. I stopped going to school . . . and started begging on the streets.”

Juliãon Soares/Yanto

“A life without love is like a bird trying to fly without wings.”
Legibere /Muhammad

These were the words shared between survivors, during a gathering of fourteen East Timorese ‘stolen children’ (now adults living in Indonesia) at a workshop in Bali on their way to be reunited with their families, in May 2015. For Juliãon and his siblings, taken when they were 8, 7 and 5 years old, this reunion would be the first time to be reunited with their father and mother after twenty years. Others, like Legibere, were separated from their families more than thirty years ago. Juliãon and his siblings had forgotten how to speak Tetun, the national language of Timor-Leste. Legibere was lucky enough to remain close to other East Timorese children, thus preserving some of his language skills.

Timor-Leste’s truth commission (Comissāo Acolhimento Verdade e Reconciliacāo or CAVR, 2002-2005) estimated that during the 24 year military occupation of then East Timor by the Indonesian military forces at least 100,000 East Timorese, out of a then total population of around 650,000, were killed or died as a result of the conflict. The Commission also recorded more than 20,000 cases of torture and thousands of serious sexual violations. The CAVR documented the systematic transfer of children as a practice sanctioned by the military and civilian authorities, involving the security forces, religious and other civilian organizations. The CAVR concluded that thousands of children were taken during the conflict. Under the title “Truth as the basis for the relationship,” the CAVR called on the Indonesian government to provide “the names and details of all East Timorese children removed  from Timor-Leste by the Government of Indonesia, military or  related personnel or institutions between 1975 and 1999.” The commission also recommended that these survivors are given “unhindered access to identity and nationality procedures, and assistance to reunite them with their families.

Following the CAVR, the Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF, 2005-2008) established by the Indonesian and Timor-Leste governments, made a similar recommendation. Calling for the establishment of a commission for the disappeared, CTF also assigned the mandate “to identify the whereabouts of all Timor-Leste children who were separated from their parents and to notify their families...primarily for those whose cases are unresolved and those still in the hands of their Indonesian wardens, including the rights of those children to freely access identification and citizenship procedures.”

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) is a regional human rights organization with a head office in Jakarta and branch offices in a number of Asian contexts and Australia. Its work focuses on contexts where many thousands of serious human rights violations have been committed and there is a serious threat of recurrence. In many of those contexts there are tens of thousands of victims of extra-judicial killings, disappearance, torture and rape. The ‘stolen children’ program is one of a range of activities AJAR carries out in these contexts, focusing on revealing the truth, bringing perpetrators to justice, helping to repair the lives of victims and reforms to prevent recurrence. AJAR, together with a group of eight organizations from Indonesia and Timor-Leste have been searching for Timor-Leste’s ‘stolen children’ in Indonesia for the last six years. Responding to the unmet promises and the lack of initiative from the two governments, AJAR facilitated a network of like-minded organizations committed to finding the ‘stolen children’ in Indonesia, and their families in Timor-Leste. Working closely with survivors, we were able to trace their whereabouts --sometimes in remote corners of Indonesia, and other times hidden in plain sight in major cities. From a sliver of their memory about their place of origin, we then try to locate their family members in Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste’s Centro Nacional Chega, a follow-up institution charged with ensuring that recommendations of the two truth commissions are implemented, and Indonesia’s National Human Rights Commission have provided official support to this civil society-led initiative.

We have now facilitated seven groups of these stolen children for family reunions, each involving three days of preparation and a week-long visit to Timor-Leste, between 2013 to 2019. In total, we have found 160 survivors. Out of this number 80 stolen children have been reunited with their families. The survivors are spread across Indonesia- from Kalimantan, Java, Sumatera, Sulawesi, etc. Looking at where they were taken from, the largest numbers come from eastern districts, where the conflict was strong. Out of the 160 stolen children we have identified, about 60% were taken by military personnel, and 22% by religious institutions.

Many of the survivors have suffered serious trauma and almost none have had any opportunity for psycho-social assistance. They spend two to three days together at AJAR’s human rights training centre in Bali in preparation for their return to Timor Leste. Many have forgotten their native tongue, Tetun, but it begins to return during the sessions and as they time they spend together.

It is impossible to know how many children were taken during this period of occupation. From the stories we have gathered from survivors, they share accounts of other children being loaded onto navy ships, hidden in boxes only to be released at sea on the way to some far off destination. In some instances, survivors talk about knowing that there were 10 to 20 other children being taken with them. The CAVR made a finding that it was impossible to determine the number of children removed. Estimates vary but are in the thousands.

These reunions are just a first step to rebuilding lives torn by trauma and loss. We understand that clearly as we continue to work with these survivors. Many are now solidly planted into their adopted country, with Indonesian spouses and children. Some continue to harbor a longing to return home, and find a way to make up for lost time. Their personal struggle is intertwined with the challenge for the two nations, who must forge a way to reconcile a difficult past. The process of reconciliation can only be build on a foundation of truth about the mass violations committed and attempts at healing. The stolen children program is one small contribution to this much broader process of reconciliation and healing for the citizens of these two countries.

[Excerpts from an article published on September 2020 [https://th.boell.org/en/2020/09/09/stolen-children-Timor-Leste updated in September 2021](https://th.boell.org/en/2020/09/09/stolen-children-Timor-Leste%20updated%20in%20September%202021).]

**Learning Objectives:**

At the conclusion of this presentation, participants will be able to:

* Describe the issue of children stolen during the conflict in Timor Leste.
* Discuss the challenges of dealing with the impact of tens of thousands of serious human rights violations
* Discuss the issue of children stolen during armed conflict

**Presenter(s)**

**Galuh Wandita**
Galuh Wandita began working on and writing about gender, peace and conflict issues in the 1990s, working with Oxfam and civil society groups in Indonesia. Together with a group of East Timorese, she co-founded East Timor’s first organization to work on violence against women, Fokupers in Dili in 1997. She was a humanitarian worker with Oxfam during the 1999 referendum in East Timor, and later joined the United Nations mission in Timor-Leste. In 2002-2005 she was Deputy Director of Timor-Leste’s truth commission (CAVR.) She returned to Indonesia, as a Senior Associate for the International Center for Transitional Justice, an international NGO based in New York, working on accountability in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. In 2012, she co-founded Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) and continues to lead the organization as its Executive Director, focusing on human rights and accountability in the region. As a member of the Working Group on the Stolen Children, she has led the initiative to find more than 180 survivors of childhood abduction from Timor-Leste (now living in Indonesia), reuniting 80 stolen children with their families. She was appointed by Timor-Leste’s Prime Minister as a member of the advisory panel on the Centro Nacional Chega (CNC), a follow-up body with a mandate to preserve memory and assist survivors. She also is engaged as an advisor to the Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Galuh holds a Master’s Degree in International Human Rights Law from Oxford University (2006). She completed her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology/Anthropology from Swarthmore College, PA (USA) in 1988.

**Patrick Burgess**

Patrick Burgess graduated with degrees in psychology and law from UNSW. He spent several years wandering the world, worked as a a volunteer at Mother Theresa's hospice for the dying in Calcutta, taught Tibetan monks in Northern India, sailed across the Pacific Ocean, hitch-hiked across the USA and rode a bicycle across Africa. Back in Australia he became a solicitor and then barrister with a practice in human rights and criminal law In 1994 he went to Rwanda and Zaire to work in the refugee camps immediately following the genocide and was appointed head of CARE Australia's team in the camps. In the following years he worked on emergency projects in Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Yemen and Indonesia. He was appointed as the Senior Member and then Acting Principal Member (head) of the Australian Refugee Tribunal. In 1999 he was recruited for the United Nations to work on the ballot in then East Timor and, following the outbreak of mass violence he remained there for six years. Patrick was the Director for Human Rights for two UN peacekeeping missions in Timor and for three years was Principal Counsel for the East Timor Truth and Reconciliation Commission where he played a major role in formulating and implementing the Community Reconciliation Procedures, a ground-breaking village based mechanism for reconciliation involving perpetrators and victims of ‘lesser crimes.'. For five years he was then The Asia Director for the International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) with teams in the post conflict settings in Afghanistan, Nepal, Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia, Timor Leste. In 2010, together with Galuh Wandita Patrick co-founded Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) and has served since that time as its President. AJAR works on victims rights, healing, truth-seeking, justice and tolerance in societies recovering from mass violations and has five offices in various Asian post-conflict settings. Patrick also regularly completes consultancies of the UN and other organisations and is currently working on a range of projects in Africa, Asia and Australia.