

LAGA FAMINE 40th ANNIVERSARY
Integrated proposal to Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC)

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Introduction

In July 2003, I was a witness to a CAVR public hearing on the 1978-80 famine in East Timor. Deliberate use of famine by the Indonesian military was the largest cause of death during the war with Indonesia.

I dedicated my testimony to all who died from hunger in Timor-Leste and specifically to the “nameless girl from Laga”. The photo of her wasted body was taken by an Australian journalist, Peter Rodgers, in Laga in October 1979. It was publicised world wide at the time, including in the UN in New York by Jose Ramos-Horta. I also committed to check if she had survived or, like many of the 300,000 who came down from the mountains during that horrific period, had died from hunger. The photo was taken at least 12 months after Ambassadors from several countries in Jakarta called for humanitarian relief and before the International Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services of the US were permitted access.

I finally fulfilled that commitment on 3-4 November 2018, the fortieth anniversary of the famine. Following All Souls Day, during which East Timorese remember the dead, and assisted by the Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC), I travelled to Laga, taking copies of Peter Rodgers photos to share with the local community.

In the short time available, I was not able to identify anyone in the photos, including the ‘nameless girl’, but I made a very promising start. I visited several sites of human rights violations. I also visited the large expanse of ground along the beach east of Laga where I think Peter Rodgers took his famous photos and where thousands of famine victims lie buried without any signage. The Matebian range from which the refugees descended to surrender in the hope of getting food is directly south of Laga. I also met one woman survivor and talked in detail with a prominent, well connected local citizen who vividly remembers the period and is very keen to see it researched and remembered. The local Salesian priests and sisters also expressed keen interest and support. I was not able to meet government officials. I also visited two heritage sites from the Portuguese period. They could be rehabilitated and used for educational, human rights, accommodation and tourism purposes.

This set of issues fits CNC’s mission perfectly. The issues include:

- Recognising victim/survivors from one of Timor’s most horrific and neglected periods and, in the absence of any current signage, memorialising the event and place;
- Educative preservation of other sites of conscience (sites of human rights violations) in the Laga area;
- Further statement-taking, education, research and expansion of the archives and educational resources;
- lessons for Timor-Leste on food security, disaster relief, and aid;

- opportunities for collaboration with government and community including to promote historical tourism and the local economy;
- opportunities for cooperation with Portugal on heritage;
- contact with Jose Ramos-Horta who displayed the Rodgers photos at the UN. His father is said to have been an administrator in Laga and died there.

Follow-up by CNC would also mean that recommendations I made in 2003 at the conclusion of my testimony were acted on. These included (a) that CAVR continue its inquiry into the famine and (b) that “a permanent, but educative, memorial be established about this time”.

Laga was not the only site of deaths from famine. There were many others including in the 13 ‘resettlement camps’ established by the Indonesian military. But Laga merits further research and action. No survivors from Laga testified at the CAVR public hearing and little is recorded about Laga in the CAVR report. See *Chega!, Forced Displacement and Famine*, Vol 2, Part 7.3, pp. 1167-1363.

I explained CNC, including its national brief to include municipalities, to all my contacts,

Key contacts in Laga

- Sr Joao Brito 7873 2184 7728 1111 Son of former liurai. Was politically neutral, aged 15-16 at the time of the famine and later joined the Indonesian parliament. His mother tried to help the famine victims. His brother was killed in the Yonif command post. His home is next to the Salesian church and priests house.
- Jojo – son of Joao Brito, who agreed to receive emails for his father. jojobritbel@gmail.com
- Padre Rui Gomes, SDB. Director, Laga Parish. 7781 4092
- Sister Angelita Gomes, SDB, Laga Orfanato. 7863 0523 angel_gomes21@yahoo.com
- Sra Martina Ximenes: sobrevivento from local village introduced to me by Joao Brito.

Timing

The timing for follow-up is good for two reasons:

- When finished in a year or two the new road from Dili to Baucau and on to Laga etc will make Laga more accessible.
- 2018-2019 is the fortieth anniversary of ‘the great famine’.

Solidarity with the most vulnerable survivors

This would involve research to establish who has survived, their needs (including trauma, health, housing), aspirations and what sort of assistance and interventions are needed.

Memorialisation

Joao Brito identified five (5) major human rights sites (there may be others). None of these are memorialised (except for the first site in a simple way). They are:

- Kopassus execution site of some 19 East Timorese in September 1976. The site is on the coast just east of Laga town, in an open cave, across the road from a large Chinese road screenings mill. The site is marked by a collection of stones. It seems the bodies are here too and that the local authorities have the names. The site is visited by locals on 12 November each year. Otherwise, the site is unmarked, open to animals and the weather.

- Former military post (once a Portuguese post), now in ruins, near the farol on the beach front. Timorese prisoners were held there.
- Large expanse of flat, rough terrain, some of it covered in bushes, between the new road and the beach east of Laga where famine victims congregated on their arrival from the mountains. Many died (Joao said hundreds/thousands, which fits the CRS/ICRC statistics) and were buried there to stop the spread of disease. It is presumed there are no records. There is no signage or other indication of what happened in that place.
- The remains of refugees from the interior are also believed to lie in the open ground and under the trees on the western side of the Laga cemetery. The area is unmarked and used as a soccer ground.
- The Yonif 512 military command post in the former Portuguese administrator's residence that overlooks Laga.

(Note: the abandoned Buruma prison is not in Laga but might also be researched).

Tourism and education

- I am convinced (from experience in Europe and other places) that heritage tourism is of great interest to many visitors. Most outsiders associate Timor with history, war and struggle and are interested to know more and be inspired. However, the settings of the RDTL tourism ministry seem to be fixed on Timor's natural attributes (beaches, scenery, diving). I suspect, combining the two would work better for many tourists.
- No mention is made on the web or RDTL website about the Portuguese or famine history of Laga.
- Information on the famine, its causes and consequences, could be used in the local in the local and national education system (including on health and nutrition), to support commemorations, and by tour operators.
- The outer wall of the Portuguese fort is in good condition. The interior could be used for tourist/visitor accommodation (like Balibo).
- The former Portuguese administrator's house (next to the fort) is in good condition but empty and neglected. It was the Yonif 512 command post. Many walls depict Indonesian military emblems which are in excellent condition but in danger of being vandalised by graffiti and exposure. According to Joao Brito, Jose Ramos-Horta's father was the local administrator and died in that house. Joao's own brother was killed there. The house would make an excellent tourist information/history/museum or CNC centre.
- The view from the fort and house is stunning: north over the ocean, south to the Matebian range.
- Might heritage-sensitive cities like Evora or Coimbra in Portugal take an interest in Laga and its Portuguese legacy? And/or an Australian community establish a Friendship relationship similar to those that exist with Venilale and Baucau.
- Might AFRI (Action from Ireland) be contacted or learned from? AFRI is a justice, peace and human rights organisation founded in 1975 to link Ireland's experience of famine in the 19th c with contemporary issues of hunger and food insecurity. AFRI hosts a famine walk in Ireland and uses music and drama to remember Ireland's *An Gorta Mor*. Visit: www.afri.ie AFRI's 2019 Famine Walk will be held on Saturday May 18, 2019. AFRI also does teacher training. Tom Hyland is AFRI representative in Dili malaemaubere@gmail.com

Archives

CAVR's archival collection on the famine can be supplemented with information from:

- Survivors and witnesses in Laga (and other places);
- Records of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) rescue mission to victims of the famine held by CRS and its then Indonesia director, Francis Carlin, in the USA;
- Records held by the International Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva, now reaching their access date;
- Records held by the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI);
- Records held by the countries whose Jakarta-based ambassadors were invited to visit famine sites in September 1978. The Ambassadors were from Canada, Australia, Bangladesh, Iraq, New Zealand, US, Japan, India, South Korea, Egypt, Syria and Papua New Guinea. It seems, however, that the Iraqi and Syrian Ambassadors did not take up the invitation.
- Any records held by Peter Rodgers.
- Records held by CHART (including *Aid and East Timor*, July 1979, the ACFOA report by Pat Walsh on the famine).

Further references

- The CAVR Chega! report
- CAVR public hearing book on Forced Displacement and Famine
- CAVR video recording of the public hearing on forced displacement and famine
- Witnesses who testified to the public hearing.
- CHART (Clearing House for Archival Records on Timor)
- Statements provided to CAVR in the CAVR archives.
- Photos taken by Pat Walsh

Recommendation

That CNC considers focussing some resources on the Laga famine anniversary in an integrated way. A practical project of this kind would need to be coordinated with the local administration but would appear to be welcomed by the local community. It would assist survivors and their communities and yield valuable practical experience for CNC.

Consideration also needs to be given to other communities in the area where famine victims suffered, e.g. Baguia, Quelicai and others.

[See following pages for photographs]

Appendix: Photographs



Nameless girl from Laga.
Peter Rodgers photo.



Laga famine, 1979. Peter
Rodgers photo.



Jose Ramos-Horta confronting
United Nations with Laga
famine evidence.



Peter Rodgers photographs and article, *The Age (Melbourne)*, 1 November 1979.



Kopassus execution site (1976) on the outskirts of Laga.



My principal informant, Joao Brito, and a survivor, Martina Ximines.



Famine graveyard. Open ground between the beach and the main road where thousands of famine victims are believed to lie, anonymous and unmarked. Lower-left photo shows Mt Matebian in background from whence starving refugees descended to surrender to the Indonesian military.



Yonif 512 Military command post (former Portuguese administrator's house).



Remarkably well-preserved Indonesian military murals inside Yonif 512 command post.



Portuguese fort.



View from fort across Laga to the sea.

ENDS