

Australian librarians in East Timor

The Australian library sector is playing a major role in the rebuilding of East Timor. Aid to a nation in distress has often been thought of as the domain of nurses, doctors, administrators, carpenters and other builders and healers. Judy Blood, head librarian at the ABC Reference Library, has responded to Timor's need for information specialists and is taking her special skills to Dili to assist in the massive reconstruction of their country's central library.

The East Timor Library Project was established by APHEDA (Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad) with the IEU (the Independent Education Union), the University of New South Wales and other education and union partners to redevelop the university library, which may also encompass the National Library. This represents a substantial investment in what will become an important community resource.

Essential to the project is the partnership with East Timorese educational leaders. The project was initiated and will continue to work under the direction of Father Filomeno Jacob, the East Timorese Cabinet Minister for Social Affairs, and of Dr Armindo Maia, who is charged with the oversight of higher education.

For the new transitional government of East Timor, equipping its people for self-administration and educational independence is one of its highest priorities. The amount of effort needed to achieve these aspirations should not be underestimated:

- Seventy per cent of the university in Dili was burnt down —

the remaining buildings that are habitable, are occupied by UNTAET (the United Nation's transitional administration in East Timor) and CivPol (the United Nation's civilian police services).

- The Polytechnic and Nurses Institute were both destroyed.
- There is no surviving institutional library.
- There is no functioning tertiary educational institution.
- Most of the schools were destroyed — often only walls were left standing.
- No infrastructure remains for training the next generation of students or teachers.
- The only known trained East Timorese librarian is an expatriate living in Australia.

As soon as the Indonesians left, groups of secondary and tertiary students started to re-establish school services with whatever basic resources they could muster.

Schools are being rebuilt slowly with aid coming in from many sources, in particular the NSW and Victorian Education Departments, with desks, blackboards and other classroom and student necessities.

Most primary school teachers were Timorese who were educated until Year 12, much like the Victorian era education system.

Most secondary and tertiary teachers were Indonesian who left during the violence or when the Indonesian military left the country — teacher training is one of the most significant priorities as the secondary and tertiary education systems cannot continue without teachers.

After the oppression, upheaval and violence of recent times, it is very important that the Timorese develop a cohesive community with secure, established services. Strategies to retain young people and to draw back many of those living abroad as refugees will need to be implemented.

Faced with the overwhelming enormity of her task, Judy Blood sought a partner to provide her with the tools to construct a library. Judy says she is still unable to absorb the speed of the response from her library software vendor.

'I wanted a 21st century library management system for the University Library of East Timor — plug it in, switch it on and be operating at full AACR2/Z39.50 standards. I approached John Ridler a week before leaving Australia and he came back the next morning from the Sagebrush Corporation who were delighted to assist with the Athena library software — this will allow us to get started straight away.'

'By the time I reach Dili at the beginning of September there will hopefully be a number of desks and chairs, computers and a printer, a couple of telecommunications connections and whatever cataloguing and processing resources that can be rustled up in the meantime. The temporary library office will most likely be housed in a couple of secure rooms in a partly burnt-out building close to the campus.

'My initial brief will be to develop an overall plan for the library service and strategies for achieving a fully functioning library service — literally out of the ashes. The immense of goodwill towards this cause in this last week has been deeply gratifying.'

We all wish Judy well in her daunting, yet ultimately rewarding, task. ■



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