

MISSION NEWS



HANDMAIDS OF THE SACRED HEART

December 2023-2024

SUFFERING IN EAST TIMOR



Sr Kumi describes the suffering in East Timor, and how our Sisters are trying to help the lovely Timorese people.

UNDERNOURISHED CHILDREN

“East Timor is a young country where half the population is below 19 years of age. **50% of the children below 5 are severely undernourished.** The problem is so serious that the newly-elected president chose this issue of child undernourishment as the top priority of his programme.

THE HANDMAIDS' RESPONSE

“In response to this serious situation we, the Handmaids started St Raphaela's Formation Centre **NAROMAN** in Dili in 2019. **Naroman** means “**LIGHT**” in Tetum, the national language of East Timor. The aim of this project is to provide the mothers of undernourished children with an intensive week of education in nutrition, so that they can improve their



children's health. This worked well until the pandemic appeared in 2020 when it had to be cancelled. On the other hand this Coronavirus crisis gave us the exceptional opportunity to uncover so many sad situations that we had been unaware of until then.

A great many people were faced with tremendous difficulties and were even without food to eat every day.



TORRENTIAL RAIN

Making the situation worse were the heavy rainfall and the floods of Easter Sunday 2021. This caused more than 45 fatalities and affected more than 25,000 households across this very small country. **The number of displaced persons reached nearly 9,000, and, particularly in the heavily populated capital city of Dili, the damage was unbelievable.**

LIVING ON THE RIVER-BED

Among the victims of these floods was Olimpia's family. Olimpia was working at the Comora River, gathering sand to sell as construction material. Actually it is such a hard job that no other woman dared to do it. Olimpia had to do it because her husband was sick. **All her family was living on a dry river-bed of the Comoro River.** Learning of their situation, we offered Olimpia a place in our Nutrition Programme. She was extremely happy to be able to reinforce her "house" with the salary she earned. **Not long afterwards the terrible disaster of the floods happened. All the "houses", as well as their small portions of land where they grew vegetables, were washed away by the floods.**

HELP COMING

Learning about the distressing situation caused by the Coronavirus and the floods in East Timor, good benefactors from overseas sent many donations to help the East Timorese. **We were most grateful for their generosity.** We, the Handmaids, thought that we should give an effective response to so much generosity. We started a programme of



special visits to the families who had been enrolled in our nutrition programme,

NAROMA. Our aim was to check the **nutritional condition of the children, assessing their living conditions, and supplying them with food such as rice and oil.**

Many of them had gone back to their districts because they could not survive in the City.



But we succeeded in visiting 160 families. We found that many children who had attended the programme **NAROMA**, had deteriorated, and their nutritional condition was much worse. In one family, the father had been sick and could not work for months, and so **the children were skin and bones, as they ate only rice, once a day.**

In a **fatherless family, the mother had lost her job, and had to bake bread to sell in order to survive. Many families lived on what little “expired” food they could find cheaper in the shops of their neighbourhood.**

We found a very large family where **the wife had been taking care of her grandchildren, nieces and nephews and neighbours, in addition to her own children.**

Her husband was suffering from mental illness and was unemployed. This mother was growing vegetables in a small field, collecting empty cans to sell ...**but finally she herself became sick and died!**

THE TIMORESE

One of the characteristics of East Timor culture is a big family, and another is their traditional ceremonies on which people spend a considerable amount of money. We have always admired the Timorese people for their human values: the importance they give to a large, welcoming family and their fidelity to their traditional ceremonies so joyfully celebrated.



Now the Covid-19 situation in East Timor is over; but **the price of rice and other food products is rising. Unemployment, already high, continues to rise.** The activities of **NAROMAN** are being held as usual. **We are determined to improve our work. We want to be able to help these families to discover, by themselves what they can do with their poor resources, to improve their lives in the midst of the hardships they have to face, and provide their children with the necessary nutrition. We put our full trust in the Lord who is the real source of NAROMA, always asking for His grace so that we can deepen our solidarity with these suffering families and accompany them, whatever circumstances they have to face”.**

Our Primary school children in EAST TIMOR



CUBA TODAY



*Expelled by the Revolution,
the Handmaids are back in CUBA.
Sr Delfo gives us an idea of the reactions
of the Cuban people and how the Sisters
are trying to bring back hope and joy.*

“CAN WE TALK OF JOY?”

“This question is occasionally heard in homilies, but this same question is also constantly put by us, the people who live in, and are trying to serve this country today. The Church that does not wish to be blind or deaf to the sufferings of the Cuban people, repeats God’s words to Moses, *“I have indeed seen the misery of my people”*.”

ATMOSPHERE IN CUBA

To give an idea of the atmosphere in Cuba at this time, we can read some of the reflections of a Cuban priest. **“I have been thinking that we are not happy here. God loves us and, though suffering is part of our existence, He wants us to be happy. I learned to embrace life and to enjoy it, not to be trapped by failures and difficulties. Happiness lies more in the way we face life; but the existing circumstances can influence us greatly. How terrible can we find the pressures of discouragement, of deception, of disappointment, of disgust...They can cause our spirit to dry up. I cannot but think that we, as a nation, are drying up.**



I do not see my people happy. On the contrary. I see my country weighed down, and thrown into a constantly hostile existence. The list of daily fights is unending: food, dressing, transport, medical health, personal economy, even our rest. Families emigrate, friends emigrate, old people become poor and insecure. We are a people without any right to comfort or enjoyment even of beauty, a people who struggles more and more between the search for freedom and fear, between a “It’s enough” which breaks one’s heart, and a self-criticism which is as unexplainable as it is certain”.

The Priests and the Sisters are not happy either. However much we try to help... we don't succeed. **Never!** **We live in a sad situation: as a people we have no space to cultivate our faith. It is not easy to find time for God when our children are hungry and the money, definitely, is not there.**

HOPING AGAINST HOPE

We are in the midst of this crisis, deeply immersed in a time of many “No”s, fearing a repetition of the past, the suppression of activities a week before due to start. At this point, last summer we decided to say “Yes”, and to offer the children, adolescents, and young people spaces of joy and, facing common discouragement, to bring joy and hope.



NEW BEGINNING

Overcoming all sorts of difficulties, last summer, we joined the **Ignatian Pastoral for the Young** which had summer camps and spaces for Youth Formation, for the whole of Cuba. This allowed our smaller groups to meet other young people with an experience of God similar to their own, who also look for, *“in everything to love and to serve”* in today's reality.

These meetings were a great help, although the problems of transport and power cuts threatened the performance of all the activities.

We joined also in the activities of the Diocesan Formation Centre who had summer camps. The adolescent and young people were able to find themselves and experience the joy of being reconciled.

NEW EXPERIENCES

It was an intense summer which finished with a **Mission and workshops in Caibarien**. All the Sisters took part, together with three adolescents, six young people and a couple with their son. We stayed in the Parish of Caibarien where we were joined by the locals, ten women and one man. For months the Sisters had been collecting food so that we could give lunch and an afternoon snack to the group. **This was difficult to organise in a country where to search for food is an adventure, the electricity is cut off for 12 hours everyday, and access to gas is very difficult to obtain.** But **where there are no resources, organisation must exist!**

WORKSHOPS

In the mornings we would get more than 100





children and adolescents who after a moment of excitement with songs and dances, would take part in 8 different workshops: music, dance, theatre, pottery, handicraft... Afterwards they had recreation to run, play games to use up their energy.

We also had the little pre-school children who had their activities prepared by Sr Ana and Elizabeth, one of the

mothers. This group presented a challenge. Besides their **number was increased every day!** At the end of the morning we would evaluate our experiences and then had our lunch. In the afternoon we would go, accompanied by a sister or an adult, to visit the old and the sick. Recreational activities followed. Then for the people, who chose to stay, we would finish the day with

a shared Adoration which helped us to grow in communion. We would put in Jesus's hands the experiences of the day and our desires to continue our work.

The final day the children gave a presentation of each workshop to their parents and had water Games! It was a real Feast! **Seeing so many young people running, playing and enjoying themselves so much, gladdened our hearts!** It was an intense week of service, an injection of life for Caibarien and for those who took part. In the closing Mass we felt the **joy of the work done in common, of seeing so many people together sharing so much Joy!**



Is it possible to talk of joy and hope in Cuba Today?

Yes! We can talk of an audacious hope that is real and active, that is translated into action. Last summer we found ourselves that “hoping against hope” we were able to get together in the name of Jesus, to travel and meet new people. We could talk, with freedom and no fear, of what we were feeling and thinking. We were able to offer spaces that generate life. We worked together with people of different generations and social contexts. We could all go back and believe that it is worthwhile to get tired, that effort and work can overcome the “No”s of our reality, and, that with the “Yes” from each one of us, we can experience that in Cuba also “the Feast of the Kingdom” begins.”



NEWS FROM INDONESIA

OUR LIFE IN SUKARIA



PARISH PRIEST

Good news in Sukaria is the arrival of a **Parish Priest**. Taking advantage of the lockdown during the pandemic, together with the local people, a **pastoral house was built**, to welcome also people who come from other places. **We have started new activities with small groups: preparation for the Sacraments in various villages, preparation for the Liturgy and Sunday Catechesis for school children.**

EDUCATION

A **great challenge in our mission here is the motivation and accompanying of children, adolescents and young people to follow their studies.** Many girls leave school before finishing their secondary education to get married. Others leave school just because they want to or because their salary is needed. Many parents, with incomplete schooling themselves, do not offer great encouragement. **This year we are again supporting the Primary School several hours a week.** We are also supporting the studies of two girls from Sukaria who are attending a better secondary school in Ketapang.

A KINDERGARTEN

Seeing this need of education, we have started a **Kindergarten**, helped by some girls from Sukaria and the villages around. In reality we see this as an opportunity to prepare some girls to be teachers in the future. The children are delighted and rarely miss school. The teachers are learning little by little. At the moment we have 6 girls from 3 different villages. **It is fundamental to motivate local people to secure continuity. With so many children, the formation of teachers is our priority.**

BAMBOO PROJECT

Some of you may want to ask about our **Bamboo Project!** Yes, our bamboo house is still standing! **It is beautiful, and very much used for many of our activities.** The bamboo planted 2 years ago is growing. But the bamboo project is the one that suffered most from the pandemic. Joni, the most active young man in the Project was retained for a long time



by his family who needed him. The others were also affected by the pandemic. This and other circumstances stopped the project. **But we hope that, in the not distant future, we can let you know that we have returned to the business of “Bamboo Making Furniture”.**



*Wishing you a Beautiful Christmas
and a New Year of Peace and Happiness*

many thanks

to all who have sent:

DONATIONS

POSTAGE STAMPS

Please continue to support our Missions

Send what you can to Sister Maria

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