

RED CROSS ARCHIVES ON TIMOR-LESTE

Report on a visit to the ICRC, Geneva, 21 May 2013

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I took the opportunity of a Swiss Peace conference on archives and transitional justice to visit the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva to discuss their archives on Timor-Leste. My report on the Swiss Peace conference and other meetings, entitled *Archives and Transitional Justice*, is available separately.

ICRC files on Timor-Leste cover the organization's humanitarian activities on the ground during several critical periods in Timor-Leste's pre-independence history: the 1975 civil war; the 1979-80 famine; humanitarian relief, tracing and prison visitation 1980s and 1990s. The organisation has continued to work in Timor-Leste since independence, including on the issue of the missing.

CAVR called on governments and organizations that hold records for the years 1974-1999 to make copies available to Timor-Leste.

I am very grateful to Jean-Luc Blondel for hosting my visit and for his hospitality and helpfulness. M Blondel is Head of Division, Archives and Information Management.

I undertook to provide a formal letter of request to ICRC for the items below.

Others met at ICRC:

Marina Meier, Audiovisual archivist, Library and Public Archives Unit

Florence Zurcher, Audiovisual archivist

Sabine Haberler Kreis, Photolibrarian, Library and Public Archives Unit

Gianni Volpin, Deputy Head of Operations for East Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific

ICRC ARCHIVES ON TIMOR-LESTE

A. ICRC provided copies of the following material on Timor-Leste:

- Historical time line of ICRC activities in East Timor: 1975-1987.
- Annual reports 1975-1999/2002 (2 sets)
- 324 photos for periods 1975, 1979, 1999, 2000, 2006, 2010. Incomplete photocopy of thumbnails (with captions in English and French) provided. Complete electronic version provided separately.

To obtain copies of these photos: complete authorisation form with the reference number of the selected photo/s (il-e-02341); sign and scan, return by email (shaberler@icrc.org) or fax: +41 22 730 20 82 (c/- Sabine Haberler Kreis). Each photo in high resolution costs 8 CHF. ICRC should be informed how the photo/s will be used. ICRC will send the photo/s in high resolution when the request has been examined and accepted.

- 6 audio recordings of ICRC interviews (on cd rom). Contents: 2 re the 1975 crisis (English, 14 mins); 3 re the famine crisis 1979-80 (English/French, 20 mins); 1 (English) – no date.
- 4 videos in dvd format. Detailed list provided. In summary: (1) Operation Timor; (2) East Timor, September-October 1999; (3) The ICRC in Timor-Timur: mission accomplished; (4) Timor-Leste: helping displaced families to cope.
Instructions from ICRC: videos are not to be copied and only used 'for your own work'.
- 9 press clippings 1976-1982 (US media, solidarity publications, US congressional record).
- ICRC 'grey literature' on Timor-Leste 1996-1999 (collection of ICRC News, Information papers, Fact Sheets, and Communications).

B. Confidential restricted records

These documents comprise index cards and boxed material on individual cases of missing, tracing, family reunions etc. based on inquiries made to the ICRC. They are confidential and I was not permitted to access them. The access deadline for ICRC archives is 40 years, thus the period 1975-1999 (2002) is not yet open for research. The documents are stored in the high security basement archive of ICRC and take up approx 7 shelves across 5 bays (see photos). Records from 1975 will be open for research in 2015. Researchers will have to visit Geneva for the purpose or ask for Geneva-based assistance because the documents have not been digitised or scanned.

Notes:

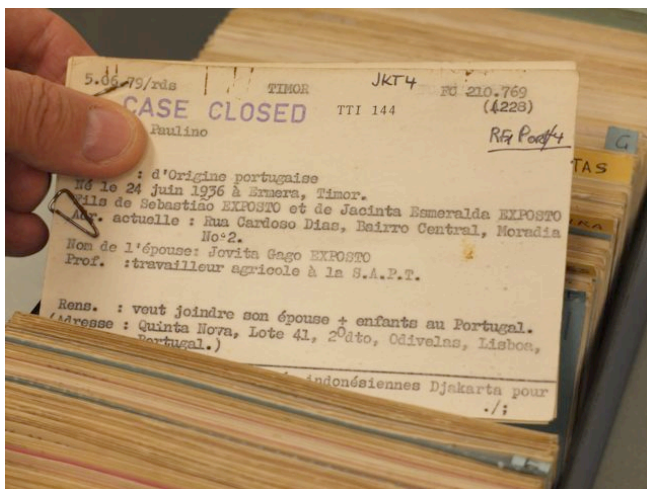
1. Victims or their families are exempted from the 40-year rule and are permitted access to their files whenever they ask. Currently victims or their families who were imprisoned on Atauro in the 80s are being given access so that they can verify claims for compensation being made to the Timor-Leste government.
2. The ICRC Delegate in Jakarta has a more complete, up-to-date and active collection than the ICRC head office in Geneva. Atauro victims are being referred to that archive.
3. The ICRC is currently revising its list of the missing and will present the revised list to the Timor-Leste and Indonesian Governments.
4. The Geneva collection seems to me to have significant gaps e.g. photos and videos on the 1975 crisis; photos from the 79-80 famine; records/cables of ICRC lobbying to be permitted access to East Timor after the Indonesian invasion; records of prison visitation including to the Comarca in Balide, Dili. It is possible, however, that material covering these gaps is held at the Delegate's office in Jakarta.
5. Given the vast scope of the ICRC records that cover many of the world's major wars and conflicts over more than 100 years (the ICRC was founded in 1863), it is most unlikely that ICRC will digitise its East Timor collection. An alternative may be for Timor-Leste to take the initiative when the access deadline permits and follow the example of Spain which provided the funding, equipment and expertise to digitise ICRC's records on the Spanish Civil War. Or Timor-Leste could ask the proposed Institute of Memory to facilitate the process or contract an organisation like CHART (Clearing House for Archival Records on Timor) for the purpose.
6. Gianni Volpin, deputy head of ICRC operations for the region, provided a briefing on ICRC's current work in Timor-Leste. M. Volpin visited Timor-Leste in 2011 and 2012. The ICRC representative in Dili is Jean-Jacques Putallaz. In addition to revising its list of the missing (as mentioned above), ICRC Dili is supporting the proposal for an Institute of Memory, the adoption of a law on the missing by the Timor-Leste Parliament, and forensic support to the Timor-Leste police (provided by an expert based in Jakarta). ICRC Dili has also undertaken a pilot support program for relatives of the missing in Bobonaro. It stopped the counselling component of this program after 18 months and is now concentrating on assisting with ceremonies and physical memorials (headstones).
7. The ICRC has recently opened a new Museum in Geneva called *The Humanitarian Adventure*. The museum is dug into the rise on which the main ICRC building (referred to by ICRC staff as The Carlton after the hotel it once was) stands. Four things struck me about the museum: (1) it displays the 2,000,000 index cards of POWs etc from World War I whom ICRC helped to locate - a striking reminder of the scale of that vast human catastrophe not to mention the extraordinary service of the ICRC; (2) the video loop of war criminals from Africa, the Balkans etc but equally, despite overwhelming evidence, the absence of any Indonesian military from that video (because they have escaped accountability not because ICRC is protecting them); (3) the absence of any reference to Timor-Leste - as far as I could see; (4) the museum's invitation for people to join the Humanitarian Adventure by becoming 'Friends of the Museum', in this way to support the museum and the values and humanitarian principles for which it stands.



The International Red Cross headquarters (and Museum) in Geneva.



Jean-Luc Blondel, head of ICRC archives, checking records on Timor-Leste.



ICRC index cards recording in French the situation of hundreds of Timorese during the Indonesian occupation. This one from the critical 1979 period records a family reunion request.



Two of many ICRC box files on Timor-Leste. These files from 1979 will be accessible in 2019