

# Customs helps East Timor towards autonomy

By Ric Cole

In a move reminiscent of how Australia's first Federal Government financed itself, the emerging independent government of East Timor is also gaining the bulk of its revenue from Customs duties being levied on cross-border trade.

At the request of the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), Australian Customs Service staff have been assisting East Timor to rebuild its border controls and to train local staff in readiness for a return to civilian government.

Two teams of six volunteers from Western Australia have each spent three months in action on the borders of East and West Timor. Before leaving for the troubled region, they all went through intensive training in remote area exposure, communications, map reading and first aid to prepare for living in very remote and inhospitable areas.

The first group, which left Perth in March and returned in June to be replaced by a second group who

returned in September, arrived in Dili aboard a UN C130 to find there were no rooms available on the 'floating hotel' - the only accommodation in town. After an hour of haggling they secured some space in a 12 person dormitory, a foreboding taste of things to come.

"When we arrived in East Timor it was apparent from a very early stage that this was not going to be a simple matter of doing the usual tasks," Team Leader Neil Sugget said. "We had to be prepared to find ways to get things done despite numerous obstacles inherent in the re-building process.

"Building a border from scratch is difficult enough, but doing so in a war-torn region requires special skills. There is nothing in any 'training package' about acquiring offices for border outposts when a departing militia have destroyed every building within sight. Nor is there any precedent for formulating ad hoc customs policies when previously there were none. These were some of the challenges that faced our team who initially were expected to fill only an advisory and training role.

"Nonetheless, I received some very positive feedback from numerous UNTAET administrators during our deployment. Most centred on the ability of the Australian Customs contingent to maintain a high work ethic, to be highly motivated and to be very flexible.

"The first task facing the team was to process returning refugees arriving by ship from Kupang carrying their life's possessions," he said.



Australian Customs officers at Batugade in East Timor.



Neil Sugget at Bobonetto at the Indonesian Border.



The first Customs team from WA: Rick Brook, Peter Lutley, Jeff Michael, Neil Sugget, Adrian Dandeker and Lorraine McCann with Les Jones, then National Director Border for Australian Customs.

Baggage searches conducted in extreme humidity on the wharf served as a reminder of the regions recent troubles with items like grenades, rifles and machetes being confiscated.

Their next brief was to set up land border posts in Batugade, a village situated about two kilometres from the border on the main road from Dili to Kupang in West Timor. Their task was to open the border to normal traffic by implementing customs and immigration procedures. Prior to this the UN Peacekeeping Force (PKF) had been the only authority in the area and the border had been closed.

Accommodation was spartan, the officers lived in UN transportable buildings and even tents when working on border crossings.

"We were constantly woken by noise from passing armoured personnel carriers, barking dogs and chickens," Neil Sugget said. "It was rare to sleep longer than three hours at a stretch."

In Batugade, the Customs Officers wore uniforms they hand washed each morning. Alongside them were Australian soldiers and Brazilian Military Police in flak

jackets, a reminder of their proximity to the militia in West Timor. When stationed at the immigration area on the border they were beside a machine gun post.

"While it sounds threatening, we never felt in any danger," said Neil Sugget. "I felt wearing our uniforms gave the right impression, that our arrival signalled the return to civilian law."

There was a small amount of traffic allowed to pass through the new border, usually UN personnel or refugees returning from West Timor. However, UNTAET and Indonesian authorities had earlier agreed to facilitate family reunion days in designated areas for families separated by the newly formed border. Batugade was the largest of these areas and it was not uncommon for 10,000 people to attend.

On one occasion, when transport was in short supply, a group of 60 people were stranded in Batugade as night was approaching. One of the Australian contingent, Rick Brook, spoke some Indonesian and managed to organise a truck to Dili, but not without first guaranteeing the driver's fee. The cost was more than the East Timorese could afford so the Australians paid the rest from their own pockets.

Customs quickly became known for their friendly attitude and the office was a popular place for Timorese children to play. This was especially the case with Lelo, a seven-year-old local boy who lived nearby. He invited all the Australian Customs staff to his birthday party as guests of honour. Among nearly 150 guests, Rick Brook was given the distinction of receiving the first piece of cake.



"We didn't know what to expect but were amazed at what confronted us on our arrival," said Ric. "There was seating for about 80 and many more standing. Lelo was sat in the middle looking like he was king for a day. After formalities, everyone was invited to help themselves to the great range of food that was on offer. Music played until the car batteries supplying the power ran out and then they would get more batteries."

Training East Timorese staff was a high priority. A basic training course was provided to about 180 Border Service recruits. As a result, Customs operations employed a higher proportion of East Timorese than any other organisation. Nearly 80 of these had worked with either Customs or Immigration with the previous Indonesian administration but most were raw recruits.

On graduating, many new East Timorese Customs Officers remarked that they were proud to be involved in the re-building of their nation. These sentiments were echoed by interim leader Xanana Gusmao, who implored the team to assist his people develop a life of freedom.

The East Timorese graduates joined the Australian Customs team in Batugade in May as the border opened to commercial traffic. Transportable UN offices had been acquired for Customs use and elementary Customs procedures had been put in place - the latter coming from negotiations between UNTAET, the interim administration and the Australian contingent.

"With no manifests and no examination areas it was back to basic Customs stuff," said Neil Sugget. "One truck can take three

or four hours of searching and negotiating over payment of the new taxes. Negotiations start around 10 per cent of a reasonable figure until a final Customs value is established. All is accepted with good grace and the importer heads off to Dili with the goods. Three days later they are back to go through it all again."

The taxes imposed at the borders are the only form of income currently being raised by the interim government, which makes collection especially important. For the re-building process to succeed the Government needs to be able to raise revenue. To this end the first Australian Customs contingent has made remarkable progress. The difficulties they faced in developing the border with West Timor could have overwhelmed those with less resolve. It is a testament to the resourcefulness and determination of the group that they achieved so much.

"We are often brought up on stories of the good old-fashioned Aussie soldier or farmer who is resourceful and self reliant," said Neil. "I

thought that Australians may have lost these skills as we have become increasingly urbanised. However, I have no doubt it was these 'typical Aussie' skills that contributed to our achievements."

The second contingent of Australian Customs staff arrived home in September leaving two training staff from Western Australia still deployed in Dili.



A UN personnel-transport helicopter at Batugade in East Timor.



Australian Customs officers relax in the 'staff dining room' of their quarters near the East/West Timor border at Batugade.