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# “In an act of solidarity and fraternity”: Timor-Leste’s reciprocal humanitarianism

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The field of humanitarian assistance is no longer dominated by Western, developed countries. Even the tiny Asia-Pacific nation of Timor-Leste is now providing humanitarian assistance to countries that have experienced devastating natural disasters. In January 2011, the Council of Ministers of Timor-Leste approved US\$500,000 in financial aid to Brazil “in an act of solidarity, fraternity, and support” to assist the nation’s recovery from floods and landslides, and another US\$500,000 for Sri Lanka to support reconstruction after large-scale flooding.<sup>i</sup> Later in the year, the Council of Ministers also approved a total sum of US\$1,000,000 “in an act of solidarity and fraternity” to help those affected by the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan.<sup>ii</sup> Timor-Leste’s commitment to assisting people and countries in need is also evident in the country’s participation in the United Nations’ peacekeeping activities. In 2010, for instance, the government of Timor-Leste sent two police officers to Guinea-Bissau to assist in the reconstruction of the country.<sup>iii</sup>

Compared to other countries, Timor-Leste’s humanitarian assistance is rather moderate in scale. While developed countries provide hundreds of millions of dollars for disaster relief as well as overseas development aid, Timor-Leste offers only a few million dollars of humanitarian aid per year. While traditional donors provide long-term benefits through organisations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Australian Agency for International Development (AUSAID), which are permanently based in countries requiring assistance, Timor-Leste’s humanitarian aid is exclusively offered on an ad hoc basis. Nevertheless, given that Timor-Leste is itself still undergoing a process of reconstruction and remains a major recipient of aid from the international community, it is noteworthy that the country is now providing humanitarian assistance to other countries.

Another interesting aspect of Timor-Leste’s commitment to humanitarian assistance is the country’s preference for the use of certain terms in relation to its activities. Rather than describing its humanitarian assistance as offered on the basis of “humanity,” the country tends to provide assistance in the name of “solidarity and fraternity,” emphasizing ties with those who have experienced suffering of various kinds. This emphasis on particular ties is distinctive given that traditional donors such as Western, developed countries normally prefer the language of universal humanity as the basis of humanitarian aid. Why does Timor-Leste continue to provide humanitarian assistance? What are the connotations of the distinctive terms that Timor-Leste prefers to use in relation to its humanitarian assistance?

Recent studies of humanitarian assistance have shown that countries provide humanitarian aid for a variety of reasons. While some countries regard overseas aid as part of compensation for their past colonial rule, others see humanitarian assistance as a means of allaying suspicion concerning their ambitions in the arena of international politics.<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, norms concerning the moral obligation to help others in need vary across cultures. The narratives of compassion that provide the ideological basis for humanitarian actions are formed and reformed over time, influenced by a nation’s cultural, religious, and political background.<sup>v</sup> This essay examines the characteristics of Timor-Leste’s humanitarian

assistance, and elucidates the hopes and ambitions attached to the nation's contemporary humanitarian aid. I argue that although Timor-Leste's humanitarian assistance demonstrates the country's commitment to moral obligations to alleviate human suffering, it also closely links to the country's desire to improve its diplomatic position in the international community. Hence, although the term "solidarity and fraternity" might reflect the country's compassion for those who are suffering in ways that Timorese have also experienced, it also functions as a call for a more symmetrical and equal relationship between Timor-Leste and other countries.

### **Moral commitment to helping others**

In many countries, the moral commitment to help others who are in distress is one of the important drivers of international humanitarian assistance. The idea that "human beings belong to one species" demands that people be offered equal treatment irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity, gender, and other considerations, and has thus been a normative foundation for the provision of assistance to countries that are experiencing disasters.<sup>vi</sup> Timor-Leste's responses to misfortune and misery in other countries are also, at least partly, motivated by such moral imperatives. By providing humanitarian assistance, Timor-Leste contributes to saving lives in other countries, delivers relief materials to people in need, demonstrates compassion to people who are experiencing difficulties, and maintains closeness with them. In other words, Timor-Leste's humanitarian assistance demonstrates the country's commitment to the "unquantifiable value" of humanitarian assistance and the principle of universal humanity.<sup>vii</sup>

While Timor-Leste's commitment to humanitarian assistance shares common moral ground with other countries, it also reflects the country's distinctive history and culture. Timor-Leste is a country that has experienced a series of humanitarian crises in its recent history. Indonesia's military invasion in 1975 resulted in a grave humanitarian disaster. Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, an estimated one-third of the population were killed in mass executions or bombings, or died as a result of famine.<sup>viii</sup> In 1999, the nation again faced a humanitarian crisis. Pro-Indonesian militias waged violent campaigns against Timor's formal independence, killing over 1,000 people and reducing entire areas of the country to ashes.<sup>ix</sup> Therefore, the experiences of losing family members, being driven from their land, and facing starvation are still fresh in the nation's memory. Given the historical background of Timor-Leste, the term "solidarity and fraternity" appears to reflect the nation's profound compassion for those who are experiencing the kinds of tragedies that the Timorese have also gone through.

Moreover, the term "solidarity and fraternity" also represents the nation's close ties with the external supporters who devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the cause of humanity and to improving the humanitarian situation in Timor-Leste. During the crises faced by the nation, a variety of non-governmental organizations and individuals launched aid activities and advocated for the rights of the Timorese. Throughout this time, these actors developed

horizontal and cooperative relationships with the people of Timor, in order to generate and distribute information regarding the humanitarian situation in Timor. In doing so, they pressured international organizations and Western, developed countries, as well as the Indonesian government, to improve the humanitarian situation in Timor.<sup>x</sup> In the Timorese context, therefore, the term “solidarity” encompasses the spirit of “standing with the weak and against the mighty,” and thus signifies the type of cooperative relationships that the nation used to have with the solidarity groups.<sup>xi</sup>

In addition, the term “solidarity and fraternity” reflects the country’s religious background. In Timor, Christianity grew under Indonesian occupation. The Catholic Church in Timor stood firmly beside the Timorese people; churches provided the local population protection from abuse and violence from the Indonesian military and police, and the bishops repeatedly sent letters to the international community petitioning to improve the humanitarian situation in Timor. International Church networks also supported the people of Timor in the name of “solidarity and fraternity.” In 1999, for instance, the Patriarch of Lisbon and President of the Portuguese Bishops’ Conference called for “‘fraternal communion, manifested in prayer and solidarity’ to help Catholics in East Timor.”<sup>xii</sup> Thus, rather than prescribing policy directions in a top-down manner as some Western countries might do, Timor’s humanitarian assistance is directed towards a more horizontal relationship with those in suffering.

### **Political interest of providing humanitarian assistance**

While Timor-Leste’s humanitarian assistance demonstrates the country’s commitment to the moral imperative to help those who are suffering, it still cannot be separated from diplomatic and security concerns. Timor-Leste is a small, young country, and it suffers from a lack of political influence in the international community. In March 2011, for instance, the country’s application to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) faced opposition from some members of ASEAN.<sup>xiii</sup> Allegedly these countries were concerned that Timor-Leste might bring more poverty-related issues and other problems to the organization, which already has its own share of economic and political issues. Therefore, bolstering its own position in the international community is a pressing need for the country. In such a political context, humanitarian assistance provides important opportunities for the country to strengthen relationships with other countries and to improve its image in the outside world.

Timor-Leste displays a strong preference for bilateral disaster relief rather than using multilateral channels, in particular government-to-government aid. In 2011, in addition to aid to Sri Lanka, Brazil, and Japan, the government of Timor-Leste also provided financial aid to Australia, which experienced large-scale flooding in Queensland,<sup>xiv</sup> and to the US, which had a series of tornadoes in the south.<sup>xv</sup> In early 2012, it also offered financial aid to key players of the Southeast Asian region – flood-affected Thailand and the Philippines.<sup>xvi</sup> In all of these cases, the amount of humanitarian assistance was not financially significant; US\$50,000 each to the US and Australia, and US\$750,000 each to Thailand and the

Philippines. Nonetheless, Timor-Leste's humanitarian aid has symbolic significance in that it demonstrates Timor-Leste's moral commitment to the suffering in other countries, and thus establishes stronger relationships with those countries. Timor-Leste's strict commitment only to disaster relief, not touching on any politically sensitive issues of the recipient countries, also reflects a view that aid is a way to establish deeper, mutually beneficial partnerships.

In addition, Timor-Leste's humanitarian assistance to other countries bolsters its international reputation. When Timor-Leste offered disaster aid to the Philippines and Thailand in early 2012, for instance, the Council of Ministers invited the ambassadors of these countries to a small ceremony at which the country's support was announced and the aid packages were officially granted. Although it was a small event and the amount of aid was not large, holding the ceremony enabled the government to publicize Timor-Leste's "brotherhood and solidarity with the two countries,"<sup>xvii</sup> and showcased its commitment to humanity and the welfare of the region to the international community. Thus, providing humanitarian aid provides important opportunities to demonstrate that Timor-Leste is a capable and responsible member of the international community.

In providing relief to these countries, Timor-Leste often emphasizes particular ties of "solidarity and fraternity" or even "brotherhood" in providing humanitarian assistance. As with Thailand and the Philippines, when providing assistance to the US, the government confirmed that "solidarity and brotherhood among people are fundamental principles" of Timor-Leste, and emphasized "the ties of friendship between Timor-Leste and the USA."<sup>xviii</sup> Given that these countries provided financial, material, and human assistance to Timor-Leste's rehabilitation and reconstruction over the last 10 years, assistance from Timor-Leste is a symbolic gesture of rewording, and emphasis on solidarity and friendship demonstrates a more reciprocal relationship with these other countries. At the same time, the term "solidarity and fraternity" and "brotherhood," which emphasizes a horizontal and cooperative relationship, appears to function as a call for a more equal relationship with these countries, or even to reinvent Timor-Leste's relationship with other international actors on a more equal level.

### **South-south cooperation for more reciprocal aid relations**

Timor-Leste has been a major recipient of humanitarian assistance over the past decade. Gaining official independence in 2002, the country has hosted a series of United Nations missions, and has received a large amount of humanitarian assistance and development aid from the international community. While the recent humanitarian intervention and humanitarian assistance to Timor-Leste played an important role in assisting the nation in its reconstruction, it has also resulted in the common perception that there is an asymmetrical relationship between the aid providers and Timor, and that humanitarian aid was a one-way process of transferring materials and services.<sup>xix</sup> To counter this perception, Timor-Leste's political leaders criticized this asymmetrical relationship between their country and the

international community. At an international conference, for instance, Timor-Leste's Minister of Finance, Emilia Pires, expressed the country's desire to establish more equal and reciprocal relationships with the providers of assistance: "[w]e wanted to end the monologue spoken at us and promote a dialogue spoken with us both globally and locally."<sup>xx</sup> She emphasized the importance of creating a "country-owned, country-led global mechanism to monitor, report, and draw attention to the unique challenges faced by fragile states," to ensure that recipient states would have more control over foreign aid programs.<sup>xxi</sup>

In this context, Timor-Leste initiated the establishment of the g7+, a grouping of 18 small, developing countries.<sup>xxii</sup> Based on the understanding that developing countries tend to be passive recipients of aid and often lack agencies to determine the way in which the aid should be used, the g7+ aims to become a key counter-group to increase the voices of the small developing countries. The g7+ criticizes a one-way transfer of materials and commodities from developed countries to developing countries, and seeks more reciprocal relationships between donor and recipient countries.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Against such a background, one can understand that Timor-Leste's humanitarian aid to other small, developing countries might have different implications for Timor-Leste's diplomatic concerns. When Haiti was struck by a massive hurricane in October 2012, Timor-Leste responded by announcing its support for the people of the country, and offered US\$1,000,000 in disaster relief to Haiti's government. Critically, the first announcement of aid was made by Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão on the occasion of his visit to Haiti, where he also attended the summit conference of the g7+.<sup>xxiv</sup> By announcing aid to Haiti, the government of Timor-Leste not only demonstrated its willingness and ability to help fellow countries in need, but also aimed to strengthen its cooperative alliance with Haiti and other member countries of the group.

## **Conclusion**

This short essay has considered the background and characteristics of Timor-Leste's humanitarian aid, and has examined the hopes and ambitions attached to that aid. Timor-Leste's humanitarian relief to other countries is derived from a moral commitment to the "unquantifiable value" of humanitarian assistance. Timor-Leste's care for those who are suffering is based on a sense of universal humanity and the country's special commitment to helping those who are experiencing the kinds of tragedies that the nation has also gone through. Nonetheless, the country's commitment to humanitarian assistance is not insulated from state's politics; rather, the decision to provide humanitarian aid is dependent on the state's political position in the region, and the act of providing humanitarian aid continues to produce political consequences. Its financial aid allows it to proclaim itself as a responsible member of the international community.

The examination also revealed hopes and ambitions that were attached to the distinctive term “solidarity and fraternity.” First, as a nation that has experienced a series of humanitarian crises in relatively recent history, Timor-Leste’s emphasis on solidarity and fraternity indicates its compassion for nations suffering the kinds of difficulties that it has also experienced. In this sense, the term “solidarity and fraternity” demonstrates an aspiration towards a more reciprocal relationship between the provider and the recipient of the assistance. Second, as a small country that is seeking equal treatment in the international community, the term “solidarity and fraternity” plays an important role in demanding equal status with other countries. Timor-Leste uses its provision of humanitarian assistance to attempt to redefine bilateral and multilateral relationships in terms of greater reciprocity.

In recent years, a diverse range of official donors, including Asia-Pacific countries, have become involved in humanitarian responses. The list of donors now includes great powers such as China and Indonesia, and the oil-rich countries of the Middle East. The emergence of new, non-traditional donor countries is itself an interesting trend, because for many years there has been a common understanding that only affluent Western countries provide humanitarian aid to crisis-affected countries.<sup>xxv</sup> Timor-Leste falls into neither of these categories. It is not an affluent Western country nor a rising economic power. Timor-Leste is a small country of just one million people, which became independent only a decade ago. Despite its small size, Timor-Leste’s humanitarian policies, shaped by the country’s past and political capacities, are playing an important role in shaping a new reciprocal culture of humanitarianism in contemporary international politics.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> “Extraordinaire Meeting of the Council of Ministers of 24th of January of 2011,” press release, [timor-  
leste.gov.tl/?p=4528&lang=en](http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=4528&lang=en); accessed March 13, 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> “Council of Ministers Extraordinary Meeting of March 12, 2011 – Dispatch of a Support Team to Japan,” press release, [timor-  
leste.gov.tl/?p=4705&lang=en](http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=4705&lang=en); accessed March 13, 2013; Embassy of Japan in Timor-Leste, [www.timor-  
leste.emb-japan.go.jp/daishinsai.html](http://www.timor-leste.emb-japan.go.jp/daishinsai.html); accessed March 13, 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> “David Representa F-FDTL ho RDTL iha Sudaun Fahe Ninia Esperiencia,” *Tempo Semanal*, September 18, 2012, [temposemanaltimor.blogspot.com.au/2012/09/david-  
representa-f-fdtl-ho-rdtl-iha.html](http://temposemanaltimor.blogspot.com.au/2012/09/david-representa-f-fdtl-ho-rdtl-iha.html); accessed March 13, 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> Andrea Binder, Claudia Meier, and Julia Streets, “Humanitarian Assistance: Truly Universal? A Mapping Study of Non-Western Donors,” GPPi Research Paper 12 (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, August 2010); and Andrea Binder and Claudia Meier, “Opportunity Knocks: Why Non-Western Donors Enter Humanitarianism and How to Make the Best of It,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 93, no. 884 (2011), pp. 1135–49.

<sup>v</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “The Stories We Tell Television and Humanitarian Aid,” *The Social Contract* 10, no. 1 (1999).

<sup>vi</sup> Michael Barnett, “Humanitarianism Transformed,” *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 4 (2005), pp. 723–40.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 733.

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- <sup>viii</sup> John G. Taylor, *East Timor: The Price of Freedom* (New York: Zed Books, 1999).
- <sup>ix</sup> James J. Fox and Dionisio Babo Soares, eds., *Out of the Ashes: Destruction and Reconstruction of East Timor* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2003).
- <sup>x</sup> John Braithwaite, Hilary Charlesworth, and Adérito Soares, *Networked Governance of Freedom and Tyranny: Peace in Timor-Leste* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2012).
- <sup>xi</sup> Barnett, "Humanitarianism Transformed," p. 734.
- <sup>xii</sup> "Portugal: Call to Ecclesial Solidarity with East Timor," *Church News*, September 1999, [www.eclesiales.org/english/archive/9909-2.htm](http://www.eclesiales.org/english/archive/9909-2.htm); accessed March 13, 2013.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Kate McGeown, "East Timor Applies to Join Asean," BBC News, March 4, 2011, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12644608](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12644608); accessed March 13, 2013.
- <sup>xiv</sup> "Government Approves Financial Support to Australia due to Extreme Floods," press release, [timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=4500&lang=en&lang=en](http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=4500&lang=en&lang=en); accessed March 13, 2013.
- <sup>xv</sup> "Council of Ministers Meeting of June 3, 2011," press release, [timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=5149&lang=en&lang=en](http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=5149&lang=en&lang=en); accessed March 13, 2013.
- <sup>xvi</sup> "Meeting of the Council of Ministers of 4 January 2012," press release, [timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=6306&lang=en&lang=en](http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=6306&lang=en&lang=en); accessed March 13, 2013.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xviii</sup> "Council of Ministers Meeting of June 3, 2011."
- <sup>xix</sup> Caroline Hughes, *Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2009).
- <sup>xx</sup> Emilia Pires, "Timor-Leste and the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States," inaugural Harold Mitchell Development Policy annual lecture, Canberra, December 4, 2012, [publicpolicy.anu.edu.au/content/emilia-pires-finance-minister-democratic-republic-timor-leste-delivers-inaugural-harold](http://publicpolicy.anu.edu.au/content/emilia-pires-finance-minister-democratic-republic-timor-leste-delivers-inaugural-harold); accessed March 13, 2013.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Member states include Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Haiti, Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Timor-Leste, and Togo.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> This South–South cooperation resembles the non-aligned movement in the 1950s and 1960s. For more consideration on the new trend of the South–South cooperation, see Adele Harmer and Lin Cotterrell, "Diversity in Donorship: The Changing Landscape of Official Humanitarian Aid," HPG Report 20 (London: Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, 2005).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> "Prime Minister and Delegation Return from Visit to the Republic of Haiti," November 22, 2012, [timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=7462&lang=en&lang=en](http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=7462&lang=en&lang=en); accessed March 13, 2013.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Harmer and Cotterrell, "Diversity in Donorship"; Binder, Meier, and Streets, "Humanitarian Assistance"; and Binder and Meier, "Opportunity Knocks."

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