



# Help for East Timor

*Special report by Stephanie Sammut*

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*Gentle hands start healing process after  
horrific ordeal - Customs officers hear tales  
of tragedy from refugees*

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**B**eing on the primary line providing the first point of contact for refugees direct from a war zone requires a delicate balance between emotion and border control.

In this time of crisis, Customs officers in Darwin needed to balance processing requirements with the human element of attending to the refugees' immediate physical and emotional needs, helping to begin the healing process of many.

"For many officers, the work has been both physically and emotionally draining," says NT Regional Director Jim Smith. "I can say that our officers dealt with this situation with gentle hands, and in a way that has attracted positive feedback from other agencies."

Many officers were effected by what they saw over the initial two days of refugee processing. These are the reflections of some of the officers involved.

***Jacki Scott - Brisbane***

"One flight of just six male UN workers, wearing military camouflage uniforms of some kind were the most traumatised people I saw. I don't know what happened to them. I can only imagine what they had seen or what had happened to them."

*Continued on the next page*



“Many people had not eaten for days. Some had only eaten ration packs. Several UN workers came with only the clothes on their backs. They just wanted a bath and a feed – in that order.”

“This experience has given me the greatest respect for the UN. These people really care. They kept saying that they didn’t want to leave the refugees behind in Dili. Men and women were crying, fearing that the refugees would be shot in the compound once the UN had left. They wanted to make it clear to me that they were going back as soon as they could. I suppose the biggest compliment we were paid was when David Winhurst from the UN said we were doing a good job.”

“I think my first tears came from finding little pouches of soil and house keys in the refugees’ bags. I just looked at them knowing that they were useless.”

“Perhaps the saddest thought was that for each refugee we processed we knew that there was so many more left behind, that perhaps these were the lucky ones.”

***Catherine Hirst – Darwin***

“Men crying, holding onto each other. So many sick people especially children and people looking okay one minute, and then next sobbing uncontrollably the next.”

***Linda Schier – Darwin***

“I will remember children with eyes like stone, devoid of any emotion, where any kind face meant the world to them. By the end of the first day of processing, Customs officers were blowing up their plastic gloves and giving them to the children. Someone then went off and bought some coloured balloons for them to play with. Just to see the children happy and playing was a big stress reliever for the Customs people involved.”

***Dennis O’Connor – Darwin***

“It was a matter of getting the sick people through the Customs line as quickly as possible. There were lots of freedom fighters in the group with pouches with bark, rocks and the like. Apparently they would boil them up and drink it, believing it would make them as strong as the tree or rock. However most of these items were of

interest to Quarantine and had to be taken away. These men just started sobbing.”

**Trevor Anderson – Melbourne**

“I found a small pack in a bag and proceeded to X-ray it. It turned out to be nothing more than instructions for a particular game but it had been folded in foil, stapled and then wrapped in cotton bandages several times. I am not sure what significance this game had to the group, but they had obviously got to extreme lengths to preserve it.”

**Lily Chooi – Melbourne**

“I was acting as an interpreter for several refugees in the group. It was so hard to translate the emotion from the first language into English and make other people really understand what the person was feeling.

One woman came off the bus and began to go into labour. A nurse was with her and I was the interpreter. She was then rushed off to hospital. It was like she had been waiting until she got to Australia. She was alone and traumatised and said that her husband was on a later flight.

I later processed this man and recognised the name. It was her husband so we quickly rushed him off to the hospital for a happy reunion.”

**Kim Schier – RM Border – Darwin**

“I remember talking to one man who spoke quite good English. He had lost his wife and three children and all his bags contained were their belongings.”

**Les Rodriguez – Sydney**

“Lollies were being handed out and the thing that really touched my heart was seeing these children offering them back to us. I don’t think we would find many Australian children doing the same.”

“Many bags contained religious statues and rosary beads made out of wood. These had to be taken away from them as they could present a quarantine risk. One person had some holy water blessed by the priest in the local village. These people kept asking if they could have them back when they returned to their country.”

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