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Challenges in the pursuit of justice for East Timor's Great Famine (1977–1979)

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ABSTRACT

Despite its devastating impact on the population, the 1977–1979 famine in East Timor scarcely features in global studies of hunger. This article traces how the famine was dealt with in international politics during the Indonesian occupation (1975–1999), and in Timor-Leste during the United Nations administration and as an independent nation-state. The East Timor case extends our knowledge of the workings of conflict-induced famines, provides insights into the attempts by transnational activists and diasporic actors to mobilise international action on crises such as famine, and examines the options for dealing with famine and its community-wide legacies in post-conflict societies including under a transitional justice model. By analysing the activities of the country's transitional justice institution, the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação, CAVR) and its successor, the Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC), as well as grassroots initiatives, the article outlines some of the challenges of delivering justice for famine victims and survivors in post-conflict societies.

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Introduction

At a public hearing held by East Timor's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação, CAVR) in 2003, João Sereno recounted his life on the run when he was displaced along with thousands of others in Suai-Covalima district, after the Indonesian invasion in 1975.¹ Sereno (CAVR 2005, 32) testified to the hearing:

Some people were killed by mines and others died of starvation. Often, we could not bury the bodies. Some people died sitting up, and at first, we thought they were just ill. It was only when we tried to lift or carry them, we would realise that a person had died.

His experiences were shared by hundreds of thousands of people throughout East Timor when it was estimated that more than half of the East Timorese population was forcibly displaced after the invasion (CAVR 2013, 231).

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The famine and forced displacement, as crimes under international law, became the focus of the work of the transitional justice institution the CAVR and later its successor, the Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC), in East Timor after the end of Indonesian rule in 1999 (Figure 1). The CAVR (2013, 1338) estimates that at least 84,200 East Timorese, but possibly up to 183,000, died in what the organisation dubs ‘the great famine of 1977–79’. It reports that these deaths were also ‘caused by ... famine-related diseases, vulnerability to sickness due to hunger, fear or exhaustion, and a lack of access to medical care’ (CAVR 2013, 1339). Drawing on CAVR and media reports, activist materials, and discussions with famine researchers in the CNC, this article analyses the connections, tensions and ruptures in transnational and historical understandings about the famine, and contestations about the manner in which it was addressed during and after Indonesian rule. The case of East Timor contributes to international studies of famine and the relationship between famine and wars, as well as to ways of tackling the legacies of famine across generations in complex, post-conflict societies.

Addressing famines as international crimes

Internationally, hunger was recognised by the mid-twentieth century as a collective social problem, arising from a failure of the political and social systems rather than the result of a divine plan, natural disasters or an individual’s moral failure (Vernon 2007, 1–2). Further studies of famines highlight the overarching role of political responsibility. Conley and de Waal (2019, 700) have argued that starvation ‘is produced by leaders’ decisions and serves political, military, or economic goals’. The East Timor case contributes three different but interrelated aspects to the study of famines across time; first, it deepens knowledge of the workings of politically induced famines, especially the role of war; second, it provides insights into the attempts by transnational activists and diasporic actors to mobilise international action on crises such as famine; finally, it examines the limitations for dealing with famine

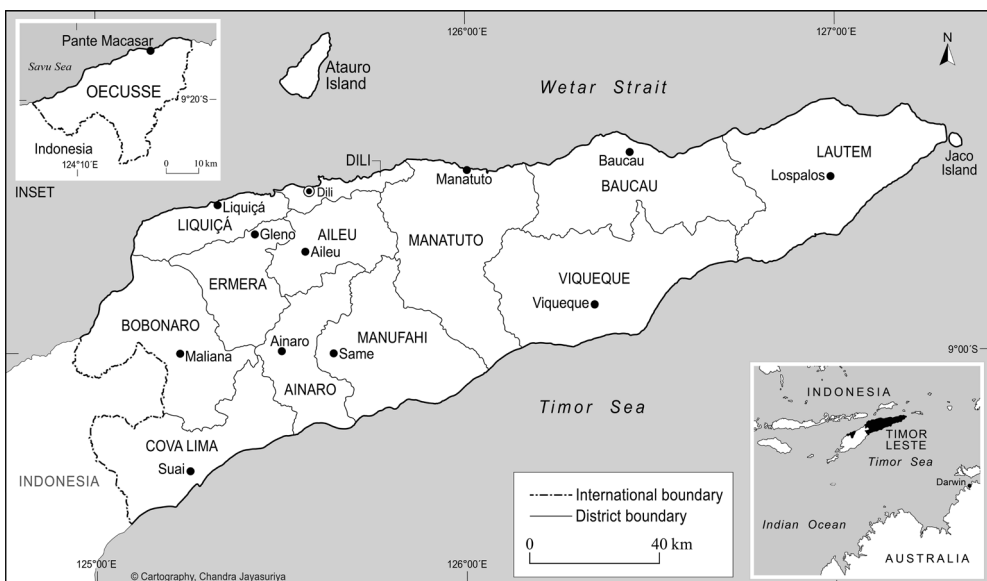


Figure 1. Map of Timor-Leste.

and its community-wide legacies in post-conflict societies, including under a transitional justice model.

East Timor is an example of mass starvation, 'when groups of people (communities, nations, classes, populations) are deprived' (Conley and de Waal 2019, 700), in this case as a deliberate strategy to incorporate the territory into the Republic of Indonesia. In studies of politically motivated hunger, East Timor's experience of deliberate mass starvation is scarcely included (Ó Gráda 2009, 23–24). In the field of East Timor studies, the history and experiences of the interrelated events of famine *and* forced displacement during the Indonesian occupation are still under-researched, with a few notable exceptions found mostly in political history (Fernandes 2013; Job 2021), despite the death of, it is estimated, at least 13% of the population connected to hunger and illness in the famine years (CAVR 2013, 1338). The East Timor famine has many similarities to famines in Biafra during the Nigerian civil war (1967–1970) and Ethiopia (1984–1985) in which starvation occurred as part of an overall struggle for political control, thus demonstrating how contestations over political status have a bearing on the outbreak and perpetration of famine.

The complexity of dealing with events in East Timor as a form of political violence stemmed from dissensions on whether what occurred was famine, and whether it was carried out as part of Indonesia's deliberate wartime strategy. Scholars and legal practitioners point out that legal frameworks are rarely employed in dealing with mass starvation (Jordash, Murdoch, and Holmes 2019, 850). In relation to this, DeFalco (2011, 158) writes, 'Courts and tribunals have avoided addressing the culpability of individuals who cause mass famines for too long, especially now that humankind has entered an era where such tragedies are entirely avoidable'. The problems that courts face in addressing famine include 'a lack of understanding of the deliberate nature of the occurrence, its status as a violation of international law and how it may be prosecuted' (Jordash, Murdoch, and Holmes 2019, 851). However, the components that make up mass starvation – what Conley and de Waal (2019, 700) refer to as 'starvation crimes' – are already dealt with in international law. These include acts that destroy 'the means for producing, processing, and distributing food and water supplies alongside other objects necessary for life; displacing people away from resources necessary for life; or impeding humanitarian access to vulnerable populations' (Conley and de Waal 2019, 703). Some legal scholars therefore argue that, while prevention should be the aim of world leaders, those found to have presided over crimes leading to mass starvation should be subjected to prosecutions, sanctions and stigma (Jordash, Murdoch, and Holmes 2019, 879).

Finally, East Timor demonstrates the difficulties of tackling famine after independence, using transitional justice measures in an impoverished, post-conflict society where there are multiple and competing needs. Transitional justice mechanisms tend to be short-term, legalistic and corrective measures intended to address harms and abuses that occur in a distinct time period, usually as part of transitions from authoritarian rule or protracted conflict (Waldorf 2012). Long-term interventions are also required to address inequalities related to colonialism or socio-economic factors (Rolston and Ní Aoláin 2018). The literature on Timor-Leste's transitional justice institutions is voluminous (eg Kent 2012; Guthrey 2016). However, scholars have yet to examine in detail how such institutions have tackled the issues of famine and forced displacement and their long-term consequences to date.

Famine claimed the highest number of East Timorese lives compared to any other event during the Indonesian occupation, but it also impacted the most on the socio-economic

and cultural life of *communities*, through disruption to customary rituals such as those involving marriage, harvest and death. Lands were forcibly abandoned, sometimes taken over by the Indonesian army or settlers; and livestock, farming implements and seeds were destroyed or stolen when residents were displaced. Such losses were not easily overcome during the Indonesian occupation, or after its cessation through the processes of transitional justice.

Memorialisation has functioned as a strategy to counter forgetting or tackle the failure of international law to prosecute starvation crimes. Indeed, as Ó Gráda (2009, 39–44) and other scholars (MacLean 2016; Schwartz 2020) have shown, the legacies of famine live on in popular memory and are recounted through song, folktales, oral history, and poetry. Photographs of famine victims, usually consisting of images of passive suffering, have also come to form their own sub-genre in atrocity or disaster photography (Ó Gráda 2009, 45–47; Campbell 2012). This article examines how such memorialisation activities are taking place in Timor-Leste, which have also included paying tribute to the ancestors who perished from hunger, highlighting the intersections of the personal and the political in how the dead are regarded in the now-independent state. The processes of identifying and grieving the long dead have substituted for trials and other formal mechanisms to deal with the famine.

East Timor: invasion and starvation

When Indonesia invaded East Timor on 7 December 1975, the territory was taking early steps in the process of decolonisation from Portuguese colonial rule. João Sereno was active in the largest pro-independence party, Fretilin, which declared independence on 28 November in a failed attempt to stave off an Indonesian invasion.² Indonesia then conducted a war over the next three years to defeat the Fretilin armed forces, the Falintil (Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste, Armed Forces for the Liberation of East Timor). A pro-Indonesia provisional government was formed alongside, consisting of representatives from sections of non-Fretilin forces and led by Arnaldo dos Reis Araujo, which appealed for Indonesia to ‘integrate’ East Timor into its territory, paving the way for it to become Indonesia’s 27th province on 17 July 1976 (Krieger 1997, 46).

As a result of the invasion, aid groups, the Catholic Church, and the Indonesian government estimated that between 300,000 and 370,000 out of a population of 648,000 had been displaced (CAVR 2013, 231). Most of the displaced remained in the same local area, the subdistrict, but about half of displacement events lasted for two years or more in this territory of about 15,000 square kilometres (CAVR 2013, 2217). At first, the refugees could cultivate food when they were able to remain in one place and set up bush camps, with many of these camps designated as Fretilin-led resistance bases (*bases de apoio*). These camps were primarily located in the mountainous and more isolated regions of the territory, such as Mount Matebian, Kablaki and Ramelau, often portrayed as liberated zones. The base camps were an indispensable part of Fretilin’s strategy to win the war against Indonesia by demonstrating that it had popular support from the East Timorese living in these camps. Yet, as Robinson has argued, this strategy, entailing elements of population control, was shared and pursued to its logical extreme by the Indonesian army, and led to spiralling circles of displacement, and an eventual ‘humanitarian catastrophe’ (Robinson 2008, 31–32).

Indonesia's conduct of the war and its treatment of civilians can be categorised as consisting of what Marcus (2003, 245) refers to as 'faminogenic' policies, defined as 'creating or aiding in the creation of famine'. The Indonesian policy of 'encirclement and annihilation' from 1977 onwards led to an intensification of military operations, destroying the Fretilin bases and other bush camps. Sereno recalled that they were forced to leave the camps and the food gardens and to keep moving to avoid Indonesian warplanes and operations, staying alive by surviving on crops, such as sweet potatoes and yams, from other people's gardens, as well as wild bush foods (CAVR 2005, 32). He recounted that, in a matter of months, hundreds 'died because they had been surrounded and could not find food ... every day two to four people would die, most often the children and the elderly' (CAVR 2005, 32). Death surrounded those who tried to keep running. East Timorese refugee Fátima Gusmão, who migrated to Australia in 1985, recalled encountering corpses and 'many bones in the green grass' on her journey in the mountains with her family (Turner 1992, 135).

Those East Timorese who surrendered were first placed in Indonesian-run camps before being allowed to live only in army-designated areas (Budiardjo and Liem 1984). The CAVR (2013, 1174) describes the conditions in the camps as

an even worse fate than being on the run, where ... the Indonesian military made utterly inadequate provision for [camp inmates'] everyday needs and placed restrictions on their freedom of movement which made it impossible for [them] to provide for themselves.

According to Father Leoneto do Rego, a Catholic priest who lived in East Timor until 1978, camp residents did not receive any food; any aid that did arrive was confiscated by the Indonesian troops.³ Little was done to ameliorate the conditions in the camps, despite several diplomatic visits to East Timor, including by ambassadors from 11 countries in September 1978 (CAVR 2013, 232–233). Indonesia successfully blocked access to international aid agencies until 1979 when the war waged against East Timorese resistance fighters had firmly turned in its favour. Despite being aware of the famine, Indonesia's Western allies helped to conceal its extent and the fact that it was a deliberate, calculated policy to starve the enemy (Fernandes 2015).

Transnational activist campaigns on famine and decolonisation

Early campaigns on behalf of the East Timorese were mounted by a few concerned citizens in Western countries, in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, including members of the clergy, some parliamentarians, activists and aid organisations (Fernandes 2013, 62). The campaign on stopping the famine was entwined with the demand for East Timorese self-determination, with these groups arguing that the famine stemmed from the invasion, which was illegal under international law. In 1978, the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs established a subcommittee to investigate aid and famine relief for East Timor, in response to lobbying by US activists and some members, such as the House Representative for Iowa, Tom Harkin. Despite their small number, Fernandes has shown that these activists, particularly the UK-based group TAPOL Indonesian Human Rights, were especially noteworthy in calling attention to the famine and, in the longer term, established legitimacy for the East Timor cause (Fernandes 2013, 59–62).

The difficulties that Father Leoneto do Rego and others, like Fretilin leaders and East Timorese refugees in Portugal, experienced, to get the international community to act stemmed from Western support for Suharto's New Order regime, including supporting its takeover of East Timor to prevent the rise of a leftist Fretilin government. Both the major parties in Australia, Labor and Liberal, were especially vociferous supporters of Indonesia. Former Australian consul to East Timor James Dunn (1977, 417) warned that the plight of the East Timorese 'might well constitute, relatively speaking, the most serious case of contravention of human rights facing the world at this time', but the Liberal Fraser government provided *de jure* recognition of the Indonesian takeover in early 1979 (Job 2018, 452). American diplomats and politicians argued that the famine resulted from natural causes and factors that predated the 1975 invasion, and that the food shortages did not constitute famine or an Indonesian policy of genocide in East Timor.⁴

At the end of October 1979, based on his visit to the territory a few months after the entry of Western relief agencies, Australian journalist Peter Rodgers (1979) published an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* which included photographs of famine-struck children in Laga, East Timor. Four photographs, taken by Rodgers in a refugee camp, depicted boys and girls sitting or squatting on the ground and looking at the camera. East Timor advocates used these photographs as evidence of a famine, a direct result of invasion, constituting a genocide that required international intervention. However, their efforts had limited success. The photographs failed to provide incontrovertible evidence of an Indonesian-directed siege or blockade against the East Timorese people that resulted in famine.

The photographs were also used to support the continuation of Indonesian rule over East Timor, including by US congressmen, seeing such rule as inevitable. While by the twentieth century victims of hunger were, as Vernon (2007, 40) describes it, 'seen as sympathetic figures deserving of humanitarian action', the causes of specific instances of hunger and the actors to address it remained subject to debate. A photograph's ambiguity of meaning and yet familiarity as a form leads to it being interpreted and responded to in multiple ways, including with inattention and indifference, as several scholars have argued (Campbell 2007). The powerful, emotionally impactful nature of atrocity photographs can also lead to complex realities being overlooked, including in this instance the human causes of a particular famine (Linfield 2010, 50).

Photographs of the East Timorese famine victims were interpreted in a way that enabled Indonesia's colonial rule of the East Timorese to be seen as a justified response to hunger. As Chaudhary (2012, 171) has shown, sympathetic identification with famine victims is not enough. However, such a sentiment could instead convince the viewer of the need to control the subjects in the photographs in the name of humanitarian aid, thus enhancing imperialist power and empire-building. The polyvalence of photographs 'sustain[s] paradoxical readings' – on the one hand depicting the East Timorese as abuse victims, while on the other presenting East Timor as 'an infantile, inferior, and helpless zone of despair' (Campbell 2012, 85). The solutions to such despair became a source of debate – a return to Fretilin rule, an act of self-determination or continuing Indonesian control. Western powers, such as the US, the UK and Australia, supported their ally Indonesia and its occupation for the next 20 years (Simpson 2005).

Addressing the famine after independence: the work of the CAVR

On 30 August 1999, over three-quarters of East Timorese voted against a special autonomy package offered by Indonesia and opted for independence in a ballot sponsored by the United Nations (UN). In the same year, statistics reveal that close to 2000 people were killed, and the territory was subjected to a scorched earth policy by army-sponsored pro-Indonesia militias. The UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET, 1999–2002) assumed control in September 1999. Human rights activists, survivors and some East Timorese leaders demanded the UN Security Council hold an international tribunal to inquire into Indonesia's actions in East Timor.

There were competing visions of the forms of justice that needed to be implemented in the wake of the Indonesian occupation, with justice being understood as providing redress primarily for the abuses committed during the occupation. Despite agitation from campaigners in East Timor and international solidarity activists, an international tribunal targeting Indonesia has never been held. Instead, from mid-2000, UNTAET established hybrid tribunals, the Special Panels for Serious Crimes, which put on trial those charged with serious crimes committed in 1999; then, from July 2001, a truth and reconciliation commission, the CAVR, was founded under UN auspices (Kent 2012, 46). The Serious Crimes process reflected a UN stance of favouring retributive justice, while the founding of the CAVR and a new focus on national reconciliation brought restorative justice into the picture.

The CAVR was given the mandate to establish the 'truth' on political conflict in East Timor from 1974 to 1999 (Kent 2012, 14–15). The next section of the article will analyse the ways in which the institution investigated and documented East Timorese experiences of the famine and forced displacement as part of this mandate by studying the sections of its final report, *Chega! (Enough!)* and proceedings dedicated to the famine and displacement. Its five-volume final report, released in 2005, examines several waves of displacement and famine, from the 1975 civil war between pro-independence parties Fretilin and the Timorese Democratic Union (União Democrática Timorense, UDT) to the aftermath of the UN referendum in 1999, with the most significant being the Great Famine of the late 1970s.

The CAVR drew on a range of international legal instruments to outline the rights of the East Timorese that had been violated in their experiences of forced displacement and famine. These instruments included the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 12(1) of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) on liberty of movement, the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the 1949 Geneva Convention IV on the protection of civilians in times of war, and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), such as on the right of everyone to be free from hunger (CAVR 2013, 1179). The report also drew on case law from the International Tribunal of the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Court (ICC)'s Elements of Crimes, specifically Article 7(1)(d), the crime against humanity of deportation or forcible transfer of population (CAVR 2013, 1179). As is evident from this range of legal instruments, the CAVR saw forced displacement and famine as inextricably linked, and that while both were human rights violations in themselves, they 'at the same time entailed a whole cluster of other violations' (CAVR 2013, 1174).

The CAVR was faced with several challenges at the outset in examining these two phenomena. The famine occurred at many sites across the territory, with regional distinctions in the timing and duration of episodes of hunger during 1977–1979. There was a multitude

of those in Indonesia and other countries who had knowledge of or were involved in the policy decisions that led to the famine but who could not be compelled to testify by the CAVR. In addition, unlike the victims of human rights violations such as unlawful detention, torture, sexual assault and kidnappings, many of those who had experienced famine had also died from it.

As a result, the CAVR undertook a range of data-gathering exercises, including statement-taking, interviews and death toll surveys, to gauge the impact and patterns of forced displacement and famine (CAVR 2013, 1179). During its mandate, from 2001 to 2005, the CAVR gathered data by taking almost 8000 individual testimonies and creating a number of 'community profiles' to gauge the impact of violence on the community. The extensiveness of the famine, however, also meant that the CAVR quickly encountered witnesses and survivors of the event. Around 100 interviews were conducted specifically on the topic of displacement and famine. From almost 8000 statements and 100 interviews obtained in Timor-Leste by the CAVR, 43.6% of respondents (almost half) testified to having been directly displaced and having experienced famine in the late 1970s. As part of its research, the CAVR also 'consulted published and unpublished materials, books, radio programmes, film footage, and photographs produced since 1974', showing how the availability of analysis on a given famine (or lack thereof) shapes the work of transitional justice organisations.

A third of the *Chega!* report was taken up with the topics of famine and forced displacement. The CAVR found that famine claimed the highest number of East Timorese lives compared to any other event during the Indonesian occupation, such as armed military operations. While the CAVR acknowledges that, at times, 'climatic extremes, an inhospitable environment and poverty have made hunger a persistent feature, and extreme hunger a frequent feature, of life in Timor-Leste', it argues that 'famine, however, has been quite rare ... , and almost always associated with armed conflict' (CAVR 2013, 1178). The *Chega!* report emphasised that deliberate actions and policies by Indonesia contributed to or exacerbated the famine. Such policies and actions included attacking the East Timorese civilian population through bombardment and encirclement, the destruction and theft of livestock and foodstuffs, and continuing forced displacement that had begun when the population fled the invasion or went to Fretilin-led bases. The CAVR (2013, 2303) found that Indonesian government officials and military personnel carried out 'extermination' as a 'crime against humanity' by implementing a programme of destroying food sources, interning 'large numbers of East Timorese civilians in camps and preventing them from receiving sufficient food to sustain themselves'. By identifying these acts, the CAVR thus argued that the famine occurred as a result of the invasion and subsequent policies implemented by Indonesia as part of its occupation strategy.

The recommendations related to the famine and its legacies, contained in Part 11 of the *Chega!* report, referred to the right to life, freedom from hunger, and an adequate standard of living. They comprise a mixture of recommendations on memorialisation-related activities as well as those on securing food supplies for future generations in Timor-Leste. To deal with the trauma and loss of the survivors, the CAVR recommended that families be assisted with finding and reburial of the remains of loved ones who perished in the famine. Recognising that many families still do not know what happened to their loved ones during times of displacement and famine, it also recommended that a register of the disappeared be established and, where resources permit, for exhumations to be carried out to identify remains and establish the cause of death. With regard to memorialisation, the CAVR recommended

that Parliament declare a national day to remember 'the famine of 1978–79' and to memorialise significant sites of deaths and killings. The CAVR also recommended that the Parliament promote discussion and research on food security issues in Timor-Leste, and that the government provide equal opportunity to all to enjoy the fruits of development.

CAVR public hearing on the famine

The CAVR also highlighted the experiences of forced displacement and famine in one of its public hearings, held on 28–29 July 2003 at its headquarters, a former prison in Balide, Dili. Other public hearings focused on themes such as the civil conflict before the Indonesian invasion, the effects of conflict on women and children, and political imprisonment (CAVR 2005, 4). The proceedings from each hearing were documented in booklets printed in English, Tetum, Portuguese and Indonesian, but which were available only in relatively limited circles, such as in institutional libraries and at the CAVR office.

At the two-day hearing dedicated to the famine and displacement, eight witnesses spoke about the famine and responses to it by aid organisations. In accordance with the international regulatory framework used in its investigations and final report, the famine and displacement were viewed through a human rights prism, entailing the violation of several basic rights, including rights during conflict, and the right to food, to life and to housing (CAVR 2005, 7). At the hearing, East Timorese survivors such as João Sereno, referred to earlier, recounted how the population was driven to the mountains because of the invasion. Based on their personal experiences, the speakers attested that after they had surrendered or were captured by the Indonesian army, they were confined to camps and their movements were restricted. Once they were allowed to resettle away from these camps, some, such as witness Antonio Pires, testified to repeated displacement by the Indonesian authorities as punishment each time they were suspected of aiding East Timorese pro-independence fighters.

While discussing Indonesian and international responses to the famine, East Timorese aid worker Gilman dos Santos recalled that Indonesia did very little to ameliorate the hunger, and in fact exacerbated the problem by denying entry to international aid agencies until mid-1979 (CAVR 2005, 51). As the former director of the Human Rights Office of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA), Australia's peak aid body, and a CAVR staff member at the time of his testimony, Pat Walsh related his experiences of compiling a 1979 report on the famine adopted by Australian aid agencies. He also spoke of the difficulties in garnering sufficient international attention for the famine in his campaign work in Australia, the US, Portugal and the UK. His testimony was dedicated to the famine victims at Laga, and especially to the 'nameless girl', a girl dressed in a checked sarong who had been photographed by Rodgers in 1979 (CAVR 2005, 52).

Since it was an event affecting most East Timorese, the question of how justice could be secured for survivors was a difficult one. In dealing with an event that resulted in a massive loss of life, those who had died were obviously unable to fight for or receive justice. Nor was it likely for those who had organised, planned or carried out policies that contributed, directly or indirectly, to be subjected to legal proceedings. At the public hearing, Ramos Horta warned his audience that a UN-sponsored international tribunal was unlikely and that, in his view, the securing of independence was sufficient justice, stating:

Throughout 24 years, we asked the world for justice. When we asked the world for justice, according to my understanding we were asking for liberty for Timor. In my opinion there is no greater justice than liberty. Timor has achieved liberty and independence. This is justice. (CAVR 2005, 68)

These sentiments were not necessarily shared across the country, but the prospects of an international tribunal had receded by 2003, given the lack of support from the UN and East Timorese leaders, despite East Timorese human rights activists continuing to agitate for such a tribunal and other justice mechanisms.⁵

Suggestions put forward by speakers at the public hearing on how to enact justice for the famine were largely focused on memorialisation and education, as well as constructing a safer society for the survivors. Walsh recommended that a permanent educative memorial to the famine be built, and for the East Timorese to be encouraged to record and write about their experiences and to share information about the methods that enabled survival, as ‘part of the healing’ (CAVR 2005, 57). Dos Santos hoped that his testimony could assist the CAVR to ‘uncover the truth of this terrible period of suffering’ (CAVR 2005, 51). The survivors’ accounts were less explicit about what needed to be done, with only two making suggestions about actions to be taken. Keeping in mind, though, that the testimonies were edited for publication, these written accounts can provide only a partial record of what transpired at the hearing. Speaking as a survivor, prominent resistance leader Marito Nicolau dos Reis called on the East Timorese to put violence behind them (CAVR 2005, 16). Another survivor, Manuel Carceres da Costa, expressed appreciation for the opportunity to be able to speak to the gathering, ‘as there were so many who suffered and died and who cannot be here’ (CAVR 2005, 16). Some speakers therefore perceived their presence and testimony as transmitting some of the experiences of others who had not survived; in that manner, they stood witness not just for their own direct suffering, but for the suffering of those who were no longer there.

When the CAVR’s findings were handed down in 2005, Western governments, the UN, and the East Timorese government showed little enthusiasm for acting on the report’s recommendations (Kent 2012, 46), including those relating to forced displacement and famine. Such declining interest in pursuing justice from the international community echoes the UN transitional administration’s earlier concerns regarding stability and relations with Indonesia, *vis-à-vis* the issue of dealing with human rights abuses committed during Indonesian rule. In the same year, the East Timorese and Indonesian governments established the Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF, 2005–2008), focused on the 1999 violence, on ‘moving forward’ and on improving relations between the two countries (CTF 2008, i). In economic, territorial and population terms, Timor-Leste is dwarfed by its large and powerful neighbour. At the CAVR public hearing in 2003, Ramos Horta told his audience that fostering a good relationship with Indonesia was important for East Timor’s national interest, stressing the existence of a ‘democratic Indonesia’, thus distinguishing this new Indonesia from the old.

Despite assurances by leaders like Ramos Horta, however, the collective achievement of independence appeared insufficient to offset losses suffered by the East Timorese during the liberation struggle, with serious civilian conflict breaking out in 2006 (McWilliam 2007, 38). The internal conflict exposed fissures amongst the East Timorese populace over recognition of and recompense for their struggles and sacrifices endured during the national liberation struggle. It further derailed the transitional justice process by displacing some

65,000 people in Dili and led to the fall of the Fretilin government and the deployment of Australian troops to quell the unrest. The crisis highlighted the unresolved tensions from the independence struggle, for instance in the competition for recognition in order to access education and employment opportunities. A 2006 veterans' law sought to classify and recognise those who had fought for independence, but it did so by according a higher status to those who were militants or fighters, thus challenging the CAVR's emphasis on victims (Rothschild 2020, 231).

The CNC dealing with famine and displacement

After some years wherein the pursuit of justice for past human rights abuses was cast adrift, the National Centre of Memory (Centro Nacional Chega!, CNC) was formed in July 2017, as an institution tasked with human rights promotion and the implementation of recommendations of the CAVR and the CTF through its own programme of activities, as well as throughout the East Timorese government. Established formally under a decree law (No. 48/2016), the CNC is accountable to the Prime Minister. Its objectives include to conduct memorialisation, research and education, and to carry out activities promoting the well-being of survivors of human rights violations committed under Indonesian rule.⁶

Since its founding, the CNC's activities have included the designation of historically significant sites in Dili and other areas, the organisation of group visits to such sites and the development of human rights education materials. A permanent exhibition in the CNC headquarters, the Balide Prison, traces the journey of Timor-Leste to independence chronologically and thematically, highlighting, for example, human rights abuses levelled against East Timorese opposing the Indonesian occupation. Although more complicated than these kinds of activities, there have also been some efforts at documenting and memorialising the famine, and promoting the interests of survivors, discussed in the next section of the paper.

The CNC's famine-related activities can be loosely divided into exhibitions, research and publications, and exploratory work on the establishment of a physical monument. The photographs of the children taken by Rodgers in Laga in 1979 continue to provide the basis for memorialisation of the famine. Noble (2008, 44) has characterised photography as 'a centrally important element in the material culture of protest and struggles for justice', and East Timor's case is no exception. The photographs provide ready resources and have been used in many publications and exhibitions of the CAVR and the CNC. They appear in the CAVR report, the booklet on the public hearing, at the Balide prison as part of the permanent exhibition, and in educational materials, such as comic books (CAVR 2013, 1165; 2005; Walsh 2019, 210). Visitors on tours of the permanent exhibition, including schoolchildren, university students and other members of the public, are shown the image of the Laga girl to reflect on the impact of the famine. In repurposing the photographs and imbuing them with the power to challenge a history of violence, deprivation and murder, East Timorese institutions are engaging in what Caswell (2014, 129) refers to as attempts to transform 'records of oppression to records of justice' (Figure 2).

In tackling the famine, the CNC has also embarked on thematic research (*peskiza temátiku*) on the topic of 'systematic hunger' in the period from 1975 to 1985. According to researcher Yazalde Sávio, this topic was chosen because the CAVR had considered hunger and related diseases the most significant causes of death in East Timor in these years. The CNC team



Figure 2. Nina Belo guides students through the Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC) permanent exhibition. Photograph: Raimundo Sarmento Fraga.

based its research on the assumption that hunger resulted from systematic and deliberate actions by Indonesian officials, in line with the position in the CAVR report. Methodologically, the research relied on oral histories conducted at several sites and archival research including the use of the CAVR's extensive collections of interviews, reports, testimonies and other records. However, many official records held by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Western governments about the famine remain inaccessible, including information that may further reveal the extent of their knowledge of Indonesia's policies in East Timor at that time (Walsh 2012).⁷

Oral history interviewing remains a method available to the East Timorese researchers. A team of four field researchers collected oral histories in the eastern district of Lautém, although the research was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the research team being unable to travel to regional areas due to lockdowns imposed on Dili in 2020–2021. Despite these delays, the researchers have begun to develop a picture about the specific conditions of hunger at the Fretilin base in Mount Matebian, according to Sávio. The team also obtained information regarding the conduct of military operations in that area, and how the encirclement of the base by Indonesia destroyed the capacity of the East Timorese resistance to organise food production and distribution. Their research also delves into the experience of hunger in the so-called concentration camps in Lautém, set up once the Mount Matebian population had surrendered.

Despite delays in data gathering, the researchers aim to complete their activities by the end of 2022. Using the results, the CNC plans to publish a book about the history of hunger and famine in East Timor in 1975–1985, as well as to hold a conference and an exhibition, and to build a monument to the famine. The team has published the first of a series of articles on the political history of the displacement and famine on the CNC website and social media (Sávio 2022). Titled 'Hunger as Weapon', the article clearly posits the famine as a deliberate strategy by Indonesia to win the war by forcing the civilian population to surrender. It contextualises the famine within Fretilin attempts to engage in a people's war to resist the Indonesians, including by organising food production to

sustain this war effort, an effort crushed by the Indonesian campaign of encirclement and annihilation.

In 2018, exploring the possibilities of constructing a permanent memorial to the famine, Pat Walsh, as an advisor of the CNC, went to trace the displaced people's camp in Laga and to find out the fate of its inhabitants. Residents showed him the approximate locations where the displaced had gathered beside the beach, and the graves of those who died from hunger, but Walsh found dramatic spatial changes because of the Indonesian occupation and East Timorese national development projects. New road construction threatened to erase traces of famine-related heritage sites in Laga (Walsh 2019, 225–226). His attempts to locate the children in Rodger's photographs also met with little success. From the visit, Walsh (2018) recommended to the CNC that the site be protected as a possible location of a memorial in the future, drawing parallels with monuments to the Great Irish Famine in several countries. His arguments for future preservation also included contemporary considerations, including attracting historically minded tourists to bolster Timor-Leste's revenue and using sites associated with the famine to discuss food security, disaster relief and aid. Walsh urged the East Timorese government to construct a memorial, but none has been constructed so far.

Whether a memorial is constructed or not, the East Timorese government and related institutions can further develop knowledge of the famine in written and oral formats for the purpose of historical accounting and for the sake of the descendants of those who perished or survived during the famine. This can be done using the extensive collections of testimonies currently held at several institutions including the CNC. Developing deeper insights can play a critical role in reclaiming this history from shame and oblivion and starting the process of putting in place long-term policies safeguarding socio-economic rights and ensuring food security, including by investing and strengthening the agricultural sector. Da Costa et al. (2013) have shown that, historically and today, Timor-Leste struggles with seasonal food insecurity, and the government has thus far focused on rice importation and improving agricultural productivity to address this problem. To deal with the legacies of war and the level of poverty in the country, ensuring an adequate food supply year-round would be an important and tangible measure to deal with the experience of politically induced famine as well as food shortages caused by seasonal factors. Wild foods already provide an important source of nutrition for households at risk of food insecurity (Erskine et al. 2015). Historical knowledge about a greater diversity of food crops, such as cassava, maize and wild foods eaten in lean times in the past, and the skills of how to process and cook them can also provide information on possible alternatives to the growing dependency on rice and rice imports.

Searching for and reburying human remains as a form of justice

Despite the formal recommendations put forward in the *Chega!* report on dealing with the aftermath of the famine, attempts to secure justice in state and institutional settings such as the CNC have in many ways been overtaken by activities in the family, clan and community. At the community level, these activities are related to the set of complex obligations to the dead in the dynamic relationship between them and the living in East Timorese culture, and have taken place in the context of better economic conditions that have allowed an increase in the renovation of ancestral houses (*uma lulik*) (see McWilliam 2005) and the search for and reburial of ancestral remains. Heonik Kwon (2008, 32) has discussed similar efforts in

Vietnam, coinciding with an economic upturn in the early 1990s, to recuperate and honour ancestors who were killed during the French and the American Wars. Many East Timorese believe that the dispersion of the mortal remains of people's relatives made peace unviable (de Matos Viegas 2019, 60). Mortuary rituals must be performed as soon as practicable, or the living could suffer a terrible fate as a result. In a situation of mass death, these social duties are made even more complex, as Kent and Feijó (2020, 17) write:

The circumstances in which people died often did not permit the performance of the required death rituals. The displacement and military operations that were features of everyday life meant that bodies were hastily buried in makeshift bush graves or simply abandoned to decompose.

The task of burial had to be left to others, and efforts were later made to contact family members to provide information about their loved ones, 'that [the] remains were buried under this tree, or that rock', as the chair of the CAVR, Aniceto Guterres, a human rights lawyer, explained (CAVR 2003). Guterres refers to the years of displacement and famine as the 'hardest years of our people's experience'. Yet, according to him, 'today families are finally able to make proper burials of their loved ones'. However, these recovery and reburial exercises have been conducted independently to a great extent, despite the CAVR's recommendations that the state provide assistance for the finding, identification and reburial of the remains of those who died in the famine.

The identification and reburial of human remains or their symbols, such as rocks or soil, by families and comrades-in-struggle constitute a form of justice for those who perished in the famine and conflict. Ordinary East Timorese devote 'considerable time, energy and resources' to the 'rehabilitation of graves, the recovery of human remains, and secondary burials of those who perished during the Indonesian occupation' (Kent and Feijó 2020, 18). Rituals are performed by relatives, as well as in former resistance networks through 'commissions' to recover mortal remains (Palmer 2021, 178; Kent 2020). By recuperating these remains or their symbols, they hope that the relationship with their relatives and comrades who died in the famine and conflict will be in equilibrium, as it should be. In 2021, the veterans' consultative body, the Council for National Liberation Combatants (*Konsellu Kombatente Libertasaun Nasionál*) and the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs began collecting data on the number and identities of members of each ancestral house who died between 1975 and 1999, including those who perished in the famine (GMN-TV 2021). In this way, the state thus appears to recognise the authority and capacity of the *uma lulik* to provide accurate information about the numbers of those who have died and its continuing obligations to its members even in death.

Conclusion

No famine has unfolded in silence, as Conley and de Waal (2019, 722) have argued, yet various forms of war can obscure the political nature of famine. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of East Timor. Mass starvation occurred in East Timor when Indonesia waged a war, supported by its allies, to suppress the East Timorese resistance from 1976 to 1979. The famine was then the subject of a propaganda war; on the one hand, advocates for East Timor argued for an international intervention to halt the famine and Indonesia's annexation of East Timor, while on the other, Western support for the annexation helped obscure the

identity of the perpetrators and those complicit in the outbreak of famine. Various forms of war contributed to the creation of the famine and obscured its nature and causes. The mis-categorisation of mass starvation as a natural phenomenon, or merely a regrettable by-product of conflict and political oppression, conceals the deliberate acts constituting mass starvation and is an injustice to victims, whose numbers and names are not recorded in history and who gradually disappear from human memory with the passage of time.

Timor-Leste's independence has opened some possibilities for closure, if not justice. For the survivors of political violence, justice has been scant and subsumed under nation-building priorities, not least being the need to build a positive relationship with Indonesia. Justice for those who perished in the famine, a mass crime with numerous perpetrators and victims, continues to be elusive, and criminal prosecution is unlikely. In this context, the CNC's research on and documentation of the famine, and the efforts by others to enumerate, search for and rebury the dead, all contribute towards safeguarding the memory of injustice and keeping alive the prospects of demanding accountability from Indonesia and other actors in the future.

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Notes

1. In this article, the term 'East Timor' is used to denote the period between 1974 and 1999, and the term 'Timor-Leste' is used to refer to the country founded on 20 May 2002, when independence was restored after the first independence declaration by Fretilin on 28 November 1975.
2. The Timorese Social Democratic Association (Associação Social-Democrática Timorense, ASDT) was founded in May 1974, and in September of that year became a broad political front, Fretilin

- (Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente, the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor).
3. Cited by Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) in House of Representatives (US). 1979. "Famine Relief for East Timor." Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 96th Congress, First Session, 4 December.
 4. See transcript of comments by Edward Masters and William F. Goodling, in House of Representatives (US). 1979. "Famine Relief for East Timor." Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 96th Congress, First Session, 4 December.
 5. East Timor National Alliance for an International Tribunal. 2004. "Statement to the Technical Assessment Mission from United Nations Headquarters", New York, 15 January. <https://etan.org/news/2004/01alliance.htm>. Accessed 10 August 2022.
 6. See CNC (n.d.). "Perfil, Centro Chega!:" <https://chega.tl/perfil-centro-chega/>, Accessed 23 December 2021.
 7. In 2012, the Australian Attorney-General Nicola Roxon granted a Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade application for access to Australian diplomatic cables dealing with the famine to be restricted on the grounds of national interest.

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