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Australian News Photography and Contested Images of Famine in Indonesian-Occupied East Timor

VANNESSA HEARMAN 

The Indonesian invasion of East Timor in December 1975 and subsequent military operations to suppress the East Timorese resistance led to widespread displacement and famine in 1977–79. With Indonesia restricting access to East Timor during the operations, a set of photographs of famine-afflicted children, taken by Australian journalist Peter Rodgers and published in metropolitan daily newspapers in Melbourne and Sydney in November 1979, triggered renewed debate about conditions in the territory. This article traces the production and circulation of the photographs by a range of image brokers, those working in the media and those campaigning for East Timor’s independence. The Rodgers photographs are now recognised as iconic and foundational in the collection of images used in the independence campaign. However, the history of the Rodgers photographs and the discourses that developed around them demonstrate the multiple interpretations and problems that arise in representations of famine through photographs.

When you do not have any photos ... a lot of people do not believe you.¹

(José Ramos-Horta, President of Timor-Leste and 1996 joint Nobel Peace Prize winner)

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This article contains sensitive images of child famine victims.

¹ José Ramos-Horta, ‘Closing address, 29 July 2003’, in *Timor-Leste: Forced Displacement and Famine*, CAVR (Dili: Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade, e Reconciliação Timor Leste (CAVR), 2005).

Introduction

Addressing a public hearing on forced displacement and famine held by Timor-Leste's transitional justice body, the Commission for Acceptance, Truth, and Reconciliation (Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade, e Reconciliação, CAVR), José Ramos-Horta reflected on how the absence of images in the early years of Indonesian rule created serious difficulties for him as East Timor's roving diplomat in convincing international audiences of a serious famine in the territory. Indonesia restricted media reporting and access to East Timor following its invasion in December 1975. In this context, a series of photographs taken by Australian journalist and former diplomat Peter Rodgers, which were published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* in November 1979, became important, indeed, iconic resources over the following two decades for activists seeking to challenge the Indonesian annexation (1975–99).² While the images assumed importance because access to the former Portuguese territory was restricted, they also ignited debate as to whether they constituted incontrovertible evidence of a deliberate policy of mass starvation being committed by Indonesia.

Although the publication of Rodgers' photographs and news reports has been discussed in the context of East Timorese political history and Western complicity in the Indonesian annexation of East Timor, a study of the photographs, their production and circulation, and the discourses that developed around them, remains lacking.³ Strassler has emphasised the political force of images, their capability of shaping political events by their dynamism, as well as the role of active intervention by political actors in 'making, reworking, circulating, and scrutinizing images'.⁴ Drawing on media reports, activist materials, speeches, and records of the United Nations (UN) and parliamentary bodies in Australia and the United States (US), this article traces how activists-as-image-brokers immediately after their publication and in later years adopted the Rodgers photographs as the backbone of the campaign for East Timor's self-determination. This article draws on insights from the field of visual and photography studies and political history to examine the ways in which the Rodgers photographs were repurposed to support the campaign, and it considers the reasons that they did not result in a rapid, decisive impact in the short term.

² Peter Rodgers, 'East Timor: Where Are All the People?', *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*), 1 November 1979, 7; and Peter Rodgers, 'Horror on Our Doorstep', *The Age*, 1 November 1979, 8.

³ See Clinton Fernandes, 'International Civil Society as Agent of Protection: Responses to the Famine in East Timor', in *Genocide and Mass Atrocities in Asia: Legacies and Prevention*, eds Annie Pohlman and Deborah Mayersen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 53–67; Peter Job, *A Narrative of Denial: Australia and the Indonesian Violation of East Timor* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2021); and Miranda Booth, 'East Timor in Australia–Indonesia Relations, 1974–83', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 68, no. 4 (2022): 505–24.

⁴ Karen Strassler, 'George Floyd in Papua: Image-Events and the Art of Resonance', *Trans Asia Photography* 12, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1215/21582025-10048202>, describes the dynamism of images as 'the ways that they move, mutate, and resonate in unpredictable and sometimes combustible ways' including as a result of human agency (accessed 10 January 2023).

Following the Indonesian invasion of the East Timorese capital, Dili, on 7 December 1975, between half and two-thirds of the East Timorese population of an estimated 648,000 were displaced.⁵ In July 1976, East Timor was formally declared a province of Indonesia, but fighting between the Indonesian military and East Timorese resistance forces continued until the end of 1978. From 1977, Indonesian bombardment of the mountain bases established by Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente, Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor), followed by restrictions on movement and the placement of the surrendered population into camps, led to serious food shortages.⁶ Forced displacement and famine in 1977–79 were responsible for the death of more East Timorese than any other cause during the Indonesian occupation. Established after the end of Indonesian rule, the CAVR, in its 2005 final report, blames Indonesian policies and actions as being primarily responsible for the death of civilians from illness and hunger in the period it refers to as the Great Famine of 1977–79.⁷ It estimates that at least 84,200 East Timorese, but possibly as many as 183,000, perished in that period, as a result of ‘famine-related diseases, vulnerability to sickness due to hunger, fear or exhaustion, and a lack of access to medical care’.⁸ The Great Famine and its legacies are the subject of dedicated research in Timor-Leste, most notably by the National Centre of Memory, the Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC), a successor institution to the CAVR.⁹

News photography, atrocities, and image brokers

In the twentieth century, photographs have been a central part of advocacy for social change by disseminating information and generating powerful responses.¹⁰ With journalism being what Hariman and Lucaites refer to as ‘a major institution of recording and memory’, news photographs, in particular, have become powerful evidentiary tools.¹¹ Images that depict pain can create

⁵ Based on numbers held in Indonesian camps in the late 1970s, it was estimated that between 300,000 and 370,000 people had been displaced. CAVR, *Chega! The Final Report of the Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR)* (Jakarta: KPG in cooperation with STP-CAVR, 2013), 2297.

⁶ Fretilin declared independence on 28 November 1975. CAVR, *Chega!*, 2266.

⁷ The CAVR was established to address past human rights abuses committed during Indonesian rule (1975–99) and the internal civil conflict between East Timorese political parties Fretilin and the UDT (União Democrática Timorense, Timorese Democratic Union) in August–September 1975.

⁸ CAVR, *Chega!*, 1338–9.

⁹ Vanessa Hearman, ‘Challenges in the Pursuit of Justice for East Timor’s Great Famine (1977–1979)’, *Third World Quarterly* (2022). doi:10.1080/01436597.2022.2108782 (accessed 13 November 2022).

¹⁰ See, for example, Sharon Sliwinski, ‘The Childhood of Human Rights: The Kodak on the Congo’, *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 3 (2006): 343; and Sandra Ristovska and Monroe Price, ‘Images and Human Rights’, in *Visual Imagery and Human Rights Practice*, eds Sandra Ristovska and Monroe Price (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1.

¹¹ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3.

powerful intimacies and foster local, global, or networked communities through shared activities to respond to such depictions.¹² By bringing home what Linfield describes as ‘the reality of physical suffering with a literalness and irrefutability that neither literature nor painting can claim’, photography provides a means to humanise hunger in cases of famine.¹³ Scholars are divided, however, about the extent to which seeing images of suffering can motivate viewers to act.¹⁴ Some have also been critical of the kinds of images that Western photojournalists select to represent famines in the Global South.¹⁵

In their unease about the capacity of photographs to represent suffering and to motivate viewers to address it, scholars have pointed to the mutability and performative capacity of the image. They have argued that it is in the nature of the medium of photography itself that each photograph is more than simply a single image produced by a single photographer.¹⁶

‘Visual witnessing is not a one-way mirror’, as Kozol argues, ‘but a relational process between the photographer or artists, subjects of the image, viewer, and surrounding contexts’.¹⁷ As Gervais notes, press photographs are ‘visual artifacts that need to be *historically deciphered* to highlight their function as informational vehicles’ and more.¹⁸ Viewers do not respond in a singular way when viewing images. The images may also conceal the complexity and causes of famine, such as the role of war and colonial rule and, following Lydon, ‘be profoundly complicit with injustice’ in the ways they are produced and circulated.¹⁹ Being highly visible does not necessarily lead to an improvement in the circumstances of those who appear in photographs.²⁰ The suffering and what Azoulay refers to as

¹² Anthony McCosker, *Intensive Media: Aversive Affect and Visual Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2.

¹³ Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 39. On humanising hunger, see James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (London: Belknap Press), 33.

¹⁴ See Jane Lydon, ‘Introduction: Visualising Human Rights’, in *Visualising Human Rights*, ed. Jane Lydon (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2018), 9–10.

¹⁵ David Campbell, ‘The Iconography of Famine’, in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, eds Mick Gidley, N.K. Miller and J. Prosser (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 86. See also Cormac Ó Gráda, *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 45, on visual representations of famine.

¹⁶ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 119; Karen Strassler, *Demanding Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 14.

¹⁷ Wendy Kozol, *Distant Wars Visible: The Ambivalence of Witnessing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 12.

¹⁸ Thierry Gervais, ‘Representing News with Photographs: A Visual Economy’, in *The Handbook of Photography Studies*, ed. Gil Pasternak (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 489. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Jane Lydon, *The Flash of Recognition: Photography and the Emergence of Indigenous Rights* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2012), 15. On colonial impulses in photography, see Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Christina Twomey and Andrew May, ‘Australian Responses to the Indian Famine, 1876–78: Sympathy, Photography and the British Empire’, *Australian Historical Studies* 43, no. 2 (2012): 233–52; and Susie Protschky, ‘Soldiers as Humanitarians: Photographing War in Indonesia 1945–49’, in Lydon, *Visualising Human Rights*, 57–8.

²⁰ Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, ‘The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times’, *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 1–23; Rebecca

'emergency claims', of an injured population, of the vulnerable or non-citizens, also tend to be overlooked because, for them, disaster is supposedly chronic and routine.²¹ Their suffering is consumed by the privileged as something normal and as part of what is thought to be the everyday in certain parts of the world.²² Images may be impactful but also ambiguous and multidirectional in meaning. This is so because the medium of photography itself is subject to the human agency of circulating and interacting with the images, implicating a range of image brokers.

The concept of image brokers has been used to refer to those people whose activities influence the content and circumstances in which images are produced, their circulation and availability, and the fate of these images in the long run. There is a 'complex human network' in the taking, selection and publication of news photographs, with the press photographer being only one link in the 'business of news photography', as Gervais argues.²³ Image brokers are, according to Gürsel, 'those who act as intermediaries for images through acts such as commissioning, evaluating, licensing, selling, editing, and negotiating'.²⁴ Through their action (or inaction), image brokers may be moving images or restricting their movement, influencing the extent to which new audiences interact with the images.²⁵ News photographs and their brokers engage in worldmaking and shape the image and public expectations of certain sectors of the population.²⁶ While Gürsel's analysis is predominantly concerned with the digital age, the concept applies also to pre-digital photography. In the case of the East Timor famine photographs, image brokers included not only those working in the media industry but also activists and organisations seeking to influence the outcome of political events in East Timor in the late 1970s and beyond. The following section of the article examines the historical context of the Rodgers photographs and draws on the preceding discussion of the relevant scholarship to analyse the reception and impact of his photographs.

Invasion, displacement, and information vacuum

Image-broking in relation to East Timor can be traced back to the efforts of its political leaders, predominantly in Fretilin, in harnessing what Lee has referred

A. Adelman, 'Atrocity and Aporiae: Teaching the Abu Ghraib Images, Teaching Against Transparency', *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 14, no. 1 (2014): 29–39.

²¹ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 67.

²² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 71.

²³ Gervais, 484 and 489.

²⁴ Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, *Image Brokers: Visualizing World News in the Age of Digital Circulation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 2.

²⁵ Gürsel, *Image Brokers*.

²⁶ Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, 'U.S. Newsworld: The Rule of Text and Everyday Practices of Editing the World', in *The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Global Perspectives*, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 50.

to as ‘the decolonising camera’, using photography as a means of documenting decolonisation and communicating aspirations for self-determination, in 1974–75.²⁷ Journalists and photographers such as Jill Jolliffe, Oliver Strewe, Penny Tweedie and Michael Richardson documented political developments in East Timor leading up to the 28 November 1975 independence declaration.²⁸ These efforts in documentation were abruptly interrupted by the Indonesian invasion. Visual imagery only gradually became an important part of the struggle for self-determination over the twenty-four years of the Indonesian occupation.

The Indonesian government tightly controlled the access of international journalists and visitors to East Timor, thus limiting the extent of communication directly from the territory.²⁹ The limited amount of information left Fretilin’s external representatives, such as roving diplomat José Ramos-Horta, with few sources of firsthand information and no images after the invasion, making it increasingly difficult to keep the issue alive in the international arena. Chomsky and Herman have characterised the Western mainstream media coverage of East Timor in 1975–78 as seriously lacking in critical analysis by being largely reliant on Indonesian sources.³⁰ Scholars have discussed the preponderance of tropes of Cold War and invasion in Australian media coverage of conflicts in Asia, as well as the media’s difficulties in reporting on authoritarian regimes, such as Indonesia’s New Order regime, that Australia and the United States regarded as allies.³¹

Before the publication of the Rodgers photographs, as news of food shortages emerged from 1977 onwards, supporters and opponents of the Indonesian annexation had already begun debating whether there was in fact a famine and, if there was, whether Indonesia’s annexation contributed to these conditions.³² For example, a US House of Representatives subcommittee (1978–80) on famine aid to East Timor debated the extent to which climatic and

²⁷ Christopher Lee, ‘The Decolonising Camera: Street Photography and the Bandung Myth’, *Kronos* 46, no. 1 (2020): 218.

²⁸ Jill Sykes, ‘A Painter of Photographs’, *SMH*, 10 December 1977; ‘Oliver Strewe Photographs 1975’, *Timor Archives*, 10 March 2010, <https://timorarchives.wordpress.com/2010/03/10/oliver-strewe-1975-1/> (accessed 31 October 2021); and ‘Michael Richardson Photographs 1975’, *Timor Archives*, 4 April 2018, <https://timorarchives.wordpress.com/2018/04/04/richardson-photos-1975/> (accessed 31 October 2021); and ‘Photographs of East Timor Series’, Papers of Jill Jolliffe, MS Acc09.179, National Library of Australia.

²⁹ On the short-lived Fretilin radio link with a group of supporters in Darwin, northern Australia from 1976 to 1978, see Brian Manning, ‘Charlie India Echo Tango Calling Timor Leste’, in *A Few Rough Reds*, eds Phil Griffiths and Hal Alexander (Canberra: Australian Society for the Study of Labour History), 13–26.

³⁰ Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Political Economy of Human Rights*, vol. 1, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1979), 129–204.

³¹ Prue Torney-Parlicki, *Somewhere in Asia: War, Journalism and Australia’s Neighbours 1941–75* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000); Rodney Tiffen, *Diplomatic Deceits: Government, Media and East Timor* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001); Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, *Witnesses to War: The History of Australian Conflict Reporting* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2011); and Ross Tapsell, ‘A History of Australian Journalism in Indonesia’ (PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 2009).

³² For an example of these debates in Australia parliamentary chambers, see Craig Stockings, *Born of Fire and Ash: Australian Operations in Response to the East Timor Crisis 1999–2000* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2022), 54.

seasonal factors, underdevelopment under the Portuguese, slash and burn agricultural practices, and the 1975 internal conflict between Fretilin and the UDT (União Democrática Timorense, Timorese Democratic Union) were responsible.³³ According to one subcommittee member, Republican representative William F. Goodling from Pennsylvania, 'It was not the most beautiful thing after [Indonesia] came in. But I believe had they intervened earlier, they could have saved many lives'.³⁴ In Goodling's view, famine was thus an outcome of political instability since 1975 and the Indonesian presence was, in fact, a positive and stabilising force. However, critics of Indonesia, such as Iowa Democrat representative Tom Harkin, argued that the invading country's military strategy and policies were to blame for the famine conditions in East Timor. Furthermore, in these critics' view, Indonesia's refusal to allow independent, external aid agencies into East Timor and its corruption of food aid were exacerbating the famine.

The Rodgers photographs

In mid-1979, at the tail end of the humanitarian crisis, the Indonesian government agreed to allow two international agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), to distribute aid in the territory. Peter Rodgers and two other journalists were given permission to travel to East Timor for a week in October 1979, reporting on the aid distribution activities. From 1974 to 1977, Rodgers had been First Secretary at the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. As a diplomat, he had regularly dealt with Indonesian intelligence networks, including in seeking information about the five Australia-based journalists who were murdered at Balibó, East Timor in October 1975.³⁵ Rodgers' first visit to East Timor was in April 1977 when as First Secretary he spent three days there with another senior Australian diplomat, Cavan Hogue, as Department of Foreign Affairs representatives.³⁶ Some criticised their trip for being 'secretive' and for thereby giving effective recognition to Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor.³⁷ Wishing to return to a country he had grown fond of during his posting, Rodgers resigned from the Department in 1978 to become a stringer with the *Sydney Morning Herald* (henceforth *Herald*) in Indonesia.

While in East Timor in 1979, Rodgers took several photographs of a group of extremely malnourished children, who 'were just in the most appalling

³³ House of Representatives (US), '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 1979.

³⁴ House of Representatives (US), 'Famine Relief for East Timor', 43.

³⁵ Wendy Way, *Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974–1976* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press and the Department of Foreign Affairs), 850.

³⁶ Peter Rodgers, interviewed by Michael Wilson. 29 August 2006, National Library of Australia, ORAL TRC 5687.

³⁷ Hamish McDonald, 'Diplomats on Secret Visit to Timor', *SMH*, 27 April 1977, 1.

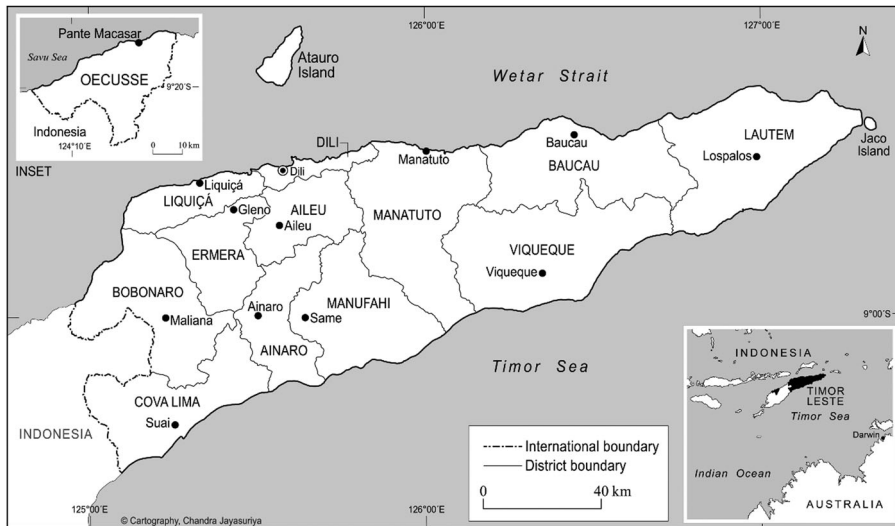


Figure 1. Map of East Timor.

condition', in Laga, a seaside village about fifteen kilometres east of East Timor's second major city, Baucau (see Figure 1).³⁸

While the local army commander had allowed him to photograph the children, Rodgers was obstructed by the state security agency, Kopkamtib (Komando Pelaksanaan Keamanan dan Ketertiban, Operational Command for Security and Order), in Jakarta, from using Indonesian satellite services to send the photographs to the *Herald*.³⁹ The images began their journey to Australia when Rodgers subsequently persuaded an Australian businessman to carry them on a Qantas Airways flight to Sydney departing Jakarta later that evening.⁴⁰

The first of Rodgers' reports from his East Timor trip was published in the *Herald* on 31 October, an article mainly focused on highlighting improvements in the availability and distribution of food.⁴¹ Rodgers argued that the crisis had multiple, complex sources and was not of the Indonesian government's making.⁴² The main thrust of his article is encapsulated in this paragraph:

Poverty, hunger, disease are *hardly new* to East Timor. *Deprivation was well established as a way of life* long before the war which erupted in the territory more than four years ago. But the violence and dislocation which came to

³⁸ Rodgers, interviewed by Wilson.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Peter Rodgers, 'Food, Not Politics Dictates the Fate of East Timor', *SMH*, 31 October 1979, 7.

⁴² Clinton Fernandes, 'The Politics of Starvation', *Timor News Network*, <https://timornewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2012/03/politics-of-starvation-dr.html> (accessed 10 October 2021).

East Timor in 1975, firstly as Timorese fought one another and then the Indonesian intruder have changed deprivation to desperation.⁴³

While noting that Indonesia had to face an 'awkward question' about why it had allowed the food shortages to 'fester', Rodgers concluded that the territory's population decline by about 100,000 people was not intended by the Indonesians.⁴⁴ This was similar to the official Australian government position at this time. According to Rodgers, the Indonesian military had simply exacerbated a pre-existing problem.

The photographs of the Laga children were published the following day on 1 November 1979 in both the *Herald* and the *Age* newspapers. That day, the *Herald* published another article by Rodgers on East Timor along with five photographs, including on the front page.⁴⁵ *The Age* in Melbourne also published the photographs (including a snippet on the front page), accompanying an article by Rodgers that it had titled 'Horror on Our Doorstep', a reprint of the 31 October *Herald* article.⁴⁶ In an oral history interview in 2006, the photographer described the images as 'journalistic shots' which were 'dramatic, striking, and strong'.⁴⁷ After several years of war during which the only images available publicly were those promoted by Indonesia, or those taken prior to the invasion by foreign journalists, Rodgers had taken and published some of the first photographs in the territory after the annexation, a significant intervention in the debates about conditions there. They prompted further questioning about Indonesian policies in East Timor and provided opponents of Indonesia's invasion with an opportunity for pressuring the Indonesian government and its allies.

Two of the photographs (Figures 2 and 3), which have been widely circulated since their initial publication, are reproduced here. These images have been reused, including to memorialise the famine in independent Timor-Leste, forming part of the country's postcolonial photographic archive (Figure 6). The CAVR and the CNC have displayed these photographs in exhibitions and included them in publications about East Timorese history. These can be considered as efforts of reparative visibility, where to witness is to acknowledge the humanness of the photographic subject and the fact that their lives mattered.⁴⁸ The display of the Rodgers images in this article draws on Azoulay's concept of the civil contract of photography, in which a viewer of these images becomes a 'civil spectator', with a responsibility 'toward the sense of the photograph'. The 'civil spectator' engages with the photograph not only as a marker of

⁴³ Rodgers, 'Food, Not Politics'. The reference to East Timorese fighting one another relates to internal conflict between Fretilin and UDT in August–September 1975.

⁴⁴ Rodgers, 'Where Are All the People?'

⁴⁵ 'Agony at Our Doorstep: Indonesia Didn't Want You to See These Pictures', *SMH*, 1 November 1979, 1.

⁴⁶ Rodgers, 'Horror on Our Doorstep'.

⁴⁷ Rodgers, interviewed by Wilson.

⁴⁸ Kozol, 205; see also Vera Mackie, 'Putting a Face to a Name: Visualising Human Rights', *Cultural Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (2014): 225.

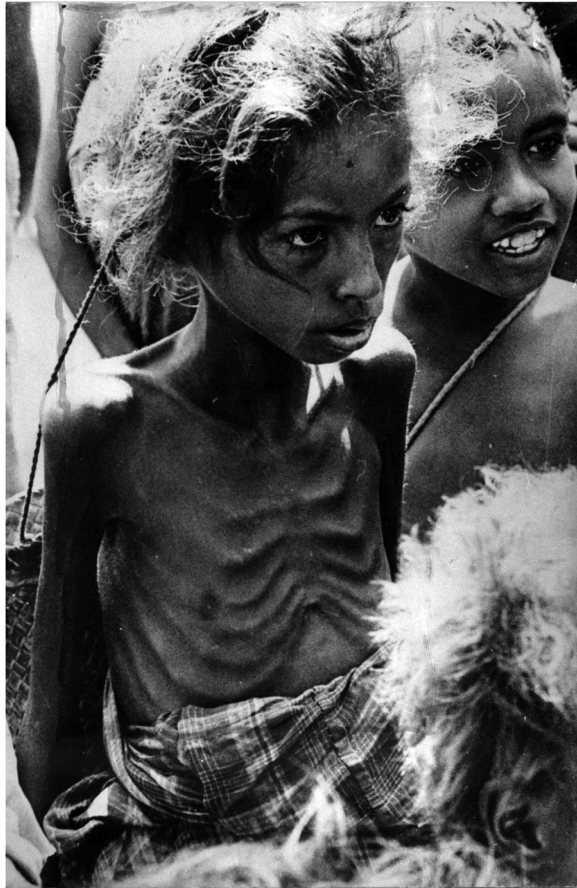


Figure 2. Children in Laga, Baucau, 1979. Photograph by Peter Rodgers.

events past, but also to reflect on the legacies of these events.⁴⁹ Although the Great Famine is over, its legacies demand a reparative response from East Timorese and other governments.⁵⁰

The Rodgers photographs depict a group of children and youths sitting on the ground, dressed in torn fabric and remnants of clothing, their penetrating gaze mostly directed at the camera. They show signs of malnutrition, with protruding bones, and some are almost skeletal. The most prominent photograph, used on the front page and then reproduced in other newspapers and in activist campaign materials in support of claims for East Timorese self-determination, features a girl

⁴⁹ Ariella Azoulay, 'The Ethic of the Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography', *Afterimage* 33, no. 2 (September 2005): 42.

⁵⁰ Hearman.



Figure 3. A group of children in Laga, Baucau, 1979. Photograph by Peter Rodgers.

wrapped in a checked sarong who appears to be the oldest of the children Rodgers photographed.

This image was reused repeatedly in East Timor-related activist materials in the years after it was first published in the *Herald* and *The Age*. Two of the photographs depict children in groups, with one photograph showing two children sitting sprawled on the ground, and another showing about five children also sitting on the ground, including a girl wearing a dress who looks incongruous amid the other, scantily clad, children.⁵¹ One photograph shows a young boy in shorts with a clean-shaven head; the caption tells readers that he is a twenty-year-old man. A photograph of a Red Cross feeding centre in Hatolia, Ermera was also published, but it did not attract as much interest as those of the Laga children.⁵²

That editorial decisions influence how images are perceived and read is evident in the case of the Rodgers photographs. Publishing two of the images on the front page of the *Herald* highlighted them: the girl in the checked sarong (the more prominent) and the group of children sitting on the ground.⁵³ The subheading, 'Indonesia didn't want you to see these pictures', refers to Indonesian officials obstructing the photographs being sent to the newspaper.⁵⁴ The text accompanying the photographs on the front page implied

⁵¹ 'Agony at Our Doorstep'.

⁵² Rodgers, 'Where Are All the People?'

⁵³ 'Agony at Our Doorstep'.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Indonesia was being disingenuous and hypocritical in attempting to suppress them, given there was nothing underhanded in the way they were obtained. The positioning of the photographs and accompanying commentary enhanced the sense of their importance, leading to their circulation and re-publication in several countries. The *Herald* editorial on these photographs informs the reader that they were taken, with the full knowledge of the Indonesian local army commander, in a village called Laga by a journalist and photographer who had military permission to travel to East Timor.⁵⁵ The Indonesian government's censorship of Rodgers' reporting and his photographs from East Timor in editions dated 1 and 2 November 1979 of the *Herald* on sale in Jakarta drove further interest in the photographs.⁵⁶

Impact of the photographs

Demonstrating their impact, the photographs were re-published in international newspapers; at the same time such re-publication also reduced the creator's control over the photographs. Some went on to be used to illustrate different newspapers' articles about hunger in East Timor. Some articles were more critical of the Indonesian government than Rodgers had been.⁵⁷ On 4 November 1979, the *Observer* in London re-published the Rodgers article under the headline 'Mercy Mission May Be Too Late for Thousands', with one photograph of the children accompanied by a largely generic caption stating, 'Misery and hunger show in the faces of East Timor's children'.⁵⁸ The re-publication of the photographs and the debates they generated helped highlight the importance of Rodgers' work, and in December 1979, he received the Graham Perkin journalist of the year award for 'his story on the human cost of Indonesia's war in East Timor', after sixteen months as a journalist.⁵⁹

Beyond the pages of newspapers, a different set of image brokers presented the photographs as much-needed visual evidence of East Timor's humanitarian catastrophe and the need for international intervention. The Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA), Australia's peak aid body, founded in 1965, had actively supported East Timor since before the Indonesian invasion, mounting a Timor Relief Appeal in the aftermath of the 1975 civil conflict.⁶⁰ After the

⁵⁵ 'Editorial: Starvation in Timor', *SMH*, 1 November 1979, 6.

⁵⁶ 'Indonesia Censors Pictures of Starving East Timorese', *SMH*, 5 November 1979, 1.

⁵⁷ For a re-publication of the photographs to illustrate another journalist's article, see Henry Kamm, 'War-Ravaged Timor Struggles Back from Abyss', *New York Times*, 28 January 1980, A1. For a more critical view of the Indonesian government, see, for example, Joel Rocamora, 'The Uses of Hunger', *Southeast Asia Chronicle* 74 (August 1980): 11 and 13.

⁵⁸ Peter Rodgers, 'Mercy Mission May Be Too Late for Thousands', *The Observer*, 4 November 1979, 12.

⁵⁹ Melbourne Press Club, '1979 Perkin Award Winner Peter Rodgers', 1 December 1979, <https://www.melbournepressclub.com/article/1979-perkin-award-winner-peter-rodgers> (accessed 29 September 2021).

⁶⁰ *ACFOA Aid Dossier 1: East Timor Today* (Canberra: ACFOA, 1981), 7.

invasion, between December 1975 and September 1977, ACFOA issued five calls for relief agencies to be allowed into East Timor. In this context, ACFOA welcomed the Rodgers photographs as visual representations of the problem that it had been trying to highlight. In its Aid Dossier, aid worker Pat Walsh wrote, 'Photographs of hungry children taken in October at Laga by the Australian reporter Peter Rodgers and smuggled out of Indonesia for publication in Australia and abroad *graphically confirmed [the] analogies*' between famines in East Timor, Cambodia and Biafra that several Red Cross and CRS officials had made.⁶¹ Walsh contrasted Western governments' attitudes towards Cambodia with their responses to East Timor, asserting that the media had given less coverage to the latter.⁶²

Members of parliament who supported East Timor's claim to independence also utilised the Rodgers photographs as evidence of famine in need of immediate action by the Australian and US governments. In the Australian parliament, a small group of MPs and senators initiated motions noting 'grave concern arising from the Indonesian treatment of the East Timorese', with some speakers referring to the photographs in the debates over the motion.⁶³ One of these pro-East Timor MPs was Tom Uren, former Deputy Labor Leader and a former Whitlam government minister. A World War II veteran, Uren was emotionally invested in East Timor in contrast to Whitlam who supported the Indonesian takeover.⁶⁴ In 1976, months after the fall of the Whitlam government, Uren urged the Fraser government to 'stand by the East Timorese' including by supporting their claim to independence and a process of self-determination.⁶⁵ Uren referred to Rodgers' report and photographs in a speech in parliament, almost two weeks after their publication in the *Herald* in 1979:

Most Australians were shocked by the recent courageous report by the *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist, Peter Rodgers, on the extent of human suffering in East Timor. They were shocked by the graphic description he gave *and by the photographs* on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and, I think, on the front page of the *Melbourne Age*. They *brought home* the starvation that is going on in East Timor. People were shocked because less than 500 miles from Australian shores thousands of people are starving to death.⁶⁶

For Uren, the photographs were visual evidence of starvation close to Australian shores. He urged viewers to be shocked into action by the photographs' emotive

⁶¹ Pat Walsh, 'The Politics of Aid', *ACFOA Aid Dossier 1: East Timor Today*, 16. Emphasis added.

⁶² *Ibid.* On comparisons with Cambodia, see also Tom Harkin, in House of Representatives (US), 'Famine Relief for East Timor', 7.

⁶³ 31. Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 8 November 1979, 2052–8; and 31. Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 13 November 1979, 2896–907.

⁶⁴ On Whitlam's stance, see Adam Hughes Henry, 'Gough Whitlam and the Politics of Universal Human Rights', *The International Journal of Human Rights* 24, no. 6 (2020), doi:10.1080/13642987.2019.1674286, 810; and Job.

⁶⁵ 'Uren Urges PM to Stand by East Timorese', *SMH*, 9 October 1976, 27.

⁶⁶ 31. Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 13 November 1979, 2901. Emphasis added.

content. While praising Rodgers' photographs, however, he disagreed with the journalist's reporting, accusing Rodgers of understating the possible number of deaths. Uren pointed to an Australian parliamentary library report by former consul to Portuguese Timor, James Dunn, indicating that as many as 200,000 might have perished already.⁶⁷

In the US House of Representatives hearings on famine relief for East Timor that had begun in 1978, the Rodgers photographs provided Democrat congressional member Tom Harkin with what he believed to be visual evidence of the famine.⁶⁸ His statement to the subcommittee stressed the importance of seeing as a precursor to action:

Everybody knows about Cambodia. I think *we ought to see* some of these [images] from East Timor. That is a 20-year-old man in East Timor. These are some kids in one of the camps. That is just a small part of it. I think no less than Cambodia, no less than Biafra, no less than the Sahel, no less than Bangladesh, no less than any other part of the world, we ought to be doing whatever we can to break this logjam and to get food aid into East Timor and carefully monitor its distribution.⁶⁹

As Walsh and ACFOA had done, Harkin also likened East Timor's famine to others, to improve the visibility of East Timor to his audience. In his speech, he also outlined for the viewer the US government action necessary to assure the East Timorese of the food they needed.

As elite-level image brokers, both Uren and Harkin believed that the Rodgers photographs provided the visual evidence necessary for the international community to act; each displayed the images with this intention. Harkin was familiar with the power of visual imagery, having photographed the notorious South Vietnamese 'tiger cages' used to incarcerate almost 500 political prisoners on Con Son Island, on a congressional visit to South Vietnam in 1970, when he was an aide to Democrat senator Neal Smith.⁷⁰ His Vietnam photographs were published in *Life* magazine's 17 July 1970 edition and led to pressure on the US government to cease its support of the Diem regime which had included the deployment of US advisors from the Office of Public Safety in the penal service.⁷¹ Harkins' use of the Rodgers photographs did not lead to the US withdrawing its support for the Indonesian annexation. In Australia's case, the Fraser government pledged an additional \$2 million as food aid but did not agree to

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ See Fernandes, 'International Civil Society', 63–4.

⁶⁹ House of Representatives (US), 'Famine Relief for East Timor', 7. Emphasis added.

⁷⁰ Ralph Graves, 'How They Unearthed the Tiger Cages', *Life*, 17 July 1970, 2A.

⁷¹ 'The Tiger Cages of Con Son', *Life*, 17 July 1970, 26–9; Stuart Schrader, "'Tiger Cages' in Vietnam: How the Call for US Prison Abolition Is a Global Issue', *UC Press Blog*, <https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/51234/tiger-cages-in-vietnam-how-the-call-for-u-s-prison-abolition-is-a-global-issue/> (accessed 12 October 2022); and Thomas Lobe, 'The Rise and Demise of the Office of Public Safety', *Armed Forces & Society* 9, no. 2 (1983): 187–214, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45304677>, 195.

Uren's requests that Australian nurses and doctors be sent to provide medical assistance and a parliamentary delegation visit East Timor.⁷² Nor did the photographs challenge the Fraser government's *de jure* recognition of the Indonesian annexation.

Activist work with photographs

Despite these difficulties in making the Rodgers photographs impactful in changing government policies, the photographs did provide the means for a resumption in the strategy, interrupted in 1975, of using visual imagery in the campaign for an independent East Timor. The photographs became iconic, appearing repeatedly in reporting on East Timor and being reused in visual materials, such as protest leaflets and posters.⁷³ Such iconicity resulted from the rarity of images of East Timor after the annexation and from the media industry's cultivation of the pictures' notoriety, giving them an aura of importance. As well, activists, as image brokers, circulated the photographs for campaign purposes.

Hunger and its photographic representation became the basis for activists; aid and solidarity groups in the United Kingdom (UK), US and Australia used them to mount a political critique of the annexation. Although they rejected Rodgers' view that the famine was not a deliberate Indonesian strategy to suppress the East Timorese resistance, they recognised the value of the photographs as visual evidence of famine.⁷⁴ The circulation of the photographs, including to parliamentarians, aimed to generate awareness of East Timor and to encourage Western governments to act to end the famine.⁷⁵ In the US, American activists (and scholars), such as Arnold Kohen, Benedict Anderson, and Noam Chomsky, campaigned on human rights issues in East Timor, including their lobbying of Congress. In Australia, several groups were founded including Campaign for an Independent East Timor, linked to the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), Timor Information Service, and Australia-East Timor Association (AETA).⁷⁶ In the UK, TAPOL, first set up in 1973 by Carmel Budiardjo and other activists to oppose the Suharto regime's imprisonment of leftists, decided to include East Timor as part of its campaigns.

From November 1979, activists and left-wing publications such as the CPA's *Tribune*, *Southeast Asia Chronicle* and the *TAPOL Bulletin* emphasised that the

⁷² 31. Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 14 November 1979, 2960.

⁷³ On markers of iconity, see Hariman and Lucaites, 5.

⁷⁴ Clinton Fernandes, *The Independence of East Timor: Multi-Dimensional Perspectives – Occupation, Resistance, and International Political Activism* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), 57.

⁷⁵ Fernandes, 'International Civil Society', 62–3.

⁷⁶ See David Scott, *Last Flight out of Dili: Memoirs of an Accidental Activist in the Triumph of East Timor* (Melbourne: Pluto Press Australia, 2005), 63–72, for an outline of the key solidarity organisations and aid groups campaigning on self-determination for East Timor in the late 1970s in Australia.

Rodgers photographs showed evidence of deliberate policies of famine and pointed to the images as symbolic of Indonesia's treatment of the East Timorese.⁷⁷ The photographs were published two weeks before Suharto's state visit to the UK where a coalition of groups protested against him.⁷⁸ TAPOL activists Carmel Budiardjo and Liem Soei Liong described the subjects of the photographs as 'emaciated ... on the verge of death'.⁷⁹ An article by Andrew Whitehouse in *Tribune* had juxtaposed one of the Rodgers photographs with a photograph of Indonesian President Suharto and his wife, Tien, eating and drinking on a visit to East Timor, and another of children being examined by a health worker, labelling the hungry children as 'the stark reality'.⁸⁰ AETA's radio program 'East Timor Calling', on Melbourne community radio 3CR, discussed the photographs and the reactions of the Indonesian and Australian governments to their publication.⁸¹ Circulation of the photographs facilitated communication and created bonds between activists, including members of the East Timorese diaspora.

By depicting atrocity, pain, and harm to the physical body, especially children's bodies, the Rodgers photographs were in keeping with other visual representations of human distress, including of the Holocaust, and the Biafran famine only a few years earlier.⁸² Activists, such as Walsh and Kohen, likened East Timor to other parts of the world through images of the starving body. Journalists and aid workers used these East Timor photographs to draw parallels with the suffering in the Nigerian civil war (1967–70) and Cambodia at the end of Khmer Rouge rule in 1978.⁸³ Relying on widespread consciousness about the Holocaust and the images of the Nazi concentration camps, activists situated the East Timor famine within global frameworks of memory, to work in concert with East Timorese diasporic activists such as Ramos-Horta, to articulate East Timor's decolonisation aspirations.⁸⁴

Image-broking also extended to activists repurposing the photographs so that they acquired different meanings, including supporting critiques of the Indonesian annexation. Within two weeks of the photographs' publication in

⁷⁷ Andrew Whitehouse, 'Timor: The Truth the Press Won't Print', *Tribune*, 7 November 1979, 8; Denis Freney, 'Timor Cover Up Continues', *Tribune*, 14 November 1979, 9; Rocamora.

⁷⁸ 'Masked Picket for President', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 November 1979, 10.

⁷⁹ Carmel Budiardjo and Liem Soei Liong, *The War Against East Timor* (London: Zed Books, 1984), 78.

⁸⁰ Whitehouse, 8.

⁸¹ Australia East Timor Association (Melbourne), 'East Timor Calling' (3CR radio program) scripts, nos. 147 (8–9 November 1979) and 148 (15–16 November 1979), Timor Information Service Archives, Melbourne.

⁸² For an example of the use of the Holocaust trope in the framing of East Timor, see Komitee Oost-Timor, Pemuda 20 Mai and Komitee Indonesië, 'Holocaust on the Sly' (Amsterdam: International Congress East Timor, 1980); and for an analysis of such, see Julian Torelli, "'The Hidden Holocaust': The East Timor Alert Network (ETAN) and Human Rights Claims in Canada, 1985–1998', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3, no. 3 (2020): 3.

⁸³ Walsh, 'The Politics of Aid', 16; Arnold Kohen, *From the Place of the Dead: The Epic Struggles of Bishop Belo of East Timor* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 14; and Rodgers, 'Mercy Mission'.

⁸⁴ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

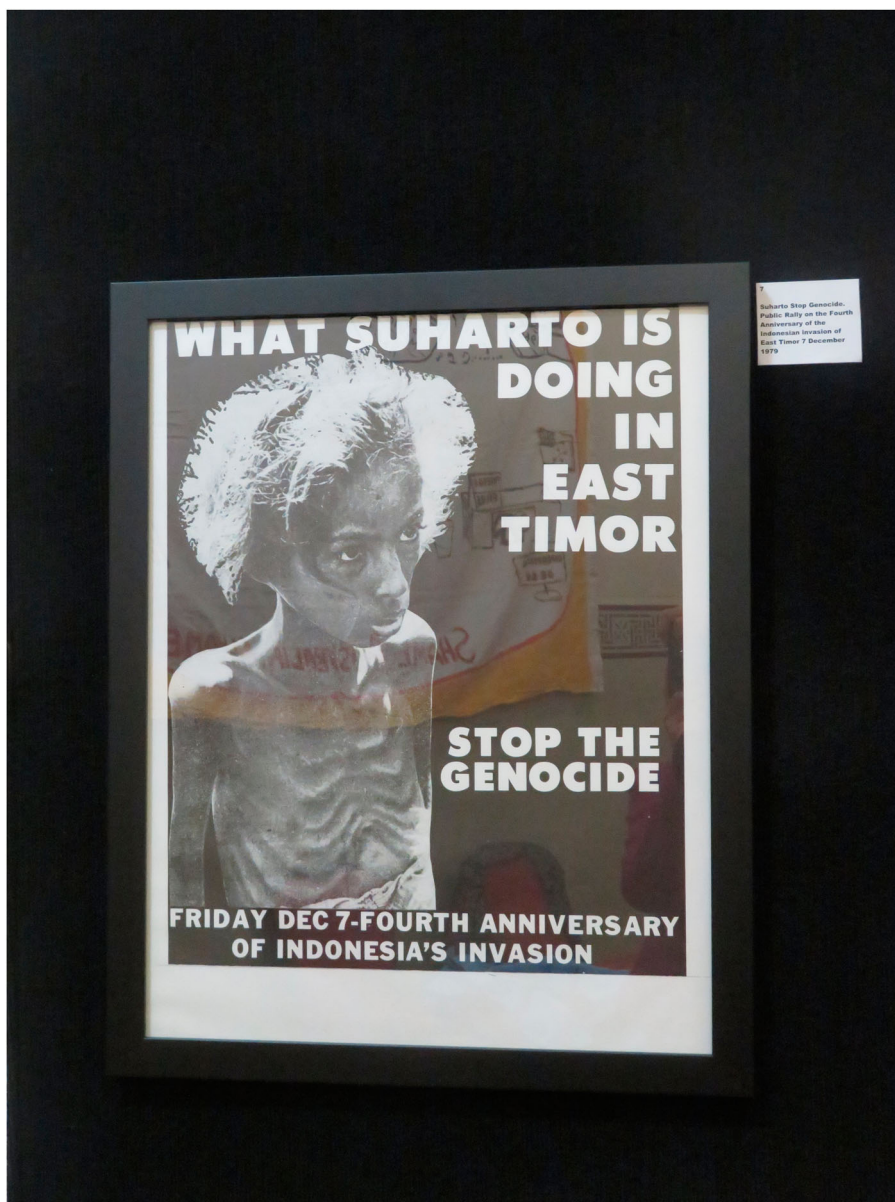


Figure 4. Poster used by solidarity groups to promote protests to mark the fourth anniversary of the Indonesian invasion. Photograph by Vanessa Hearman.

the *Herald*, solidarity groups in Australia had reused the image of the girl in the checked sarong to advertise public rallies marking the four-year anniversary of the invasion on 7 December 1979 and to call for Australian pressure for

Indonesia to withdraw (see Figure 4).⁸⁵ The poster designer had altered the background in the original photograph to a solid black, thus making the girl the sole focus of the viewer. The caption beneath the image read: 'What Suharto is doing in East Timor', followed underneath by a call to 'Stop the genocide'.⁸⁶ The girl had thus been turned into a symbol of an international crime perpetrated by the Suharto regime. The image was also repurposed as placards to be carried at public rallies. Activists as image brokers in this context reworked images to provide support to campaigns and presented them to audiences beyond the pages of the newspapers.

Not all viewers accepted these photographs as evidence that Indonesia was carrying out mass starvation in East Timor. In the US House subcommittee hearing, Harkin and those who lobbied for immediate action to investigate and tackle the famine in East Timor met resistance from other subcommittee members and State Department representatives, including US Ambassador to Indonesia, Edward Masters, who argued that the critical stage of the food shortage had passed.⁸⁷ Some image brokers were now arguing that there was greater openness and transparency in East Timor, shown by the fact that Indonesia had allowed Rodgers to take the photographs. The head of CRS, Armando Sonagere, argued that 'conflicting reports' – allegations of deliberate starvation in East Timor and rejections of such claims – were due to 'honest confusion'.⁸⁸ The contents of the photographs were seen as a depiction of something from the past, a problem that had already begun to be addressed. Such interpretations implicitly contradicted the view that the root cause of the famine was Indonesia's annexation of East Timor and its attempts to suppress the East Timorese resistance.

As an image broker himself, Rodgers also became a contender in the debate on the famine as his reporting, including the photographs, attracted world attention. The Indonesian army newspaper *Angkatan Bersenjata* condemned his reports as lies and Rodgers was denied an extension of his Indonesian visa in 1981.⁸⁹ Tapsell has characterised Rodgers' reporting and publication of his photographs as 'one of the more recognised acts of defiance' by an Australian journalist against the Suharto New Order regime.⁹⁰ However, Rodgers himself was more guarded in how he regarded his actions. A month after the photographs were published, he argued that Indonesia should not be 'dragged over the coals' for what had happened in East Timor.⁹¹ While agreeing that his photographs became more important than his news reports, Rodgers saw the interest in them as stemming from Indonesia's refusal to allow him

⁸⁵ Freney.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ House of Representatives (US), 'Famine Relief for East Timor', 35.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁸⁹ Peter Rodgers, 'Reports of East Timor Starvation Branded as Lies', *SMH*, 9 November 1979, 17.

⁹⁰ Tapsell, 156.

⁹¹ 'Journalist: Put Timorese First', *SMH*, 5 December 1979, 8.

to send them through its official facilities.⁹² He did not see them as evidence of Indonesian-induced famine, deliberate starvation, or genocide in East Timor. He concluded that the military officers who had given him permission to travel to East Timor had been unaware of just how terrible the conditions were; they were left in the dark because of the tendency of Indonesian soldiers to tell superiors only what the soldiers thought they wanted to hear.⁹³ By engaging in such a way, the photographer was intervening in the debate on his reporting and photographs on the basis of his knowledge of the workings of the Indonesian regime and the difficult balancing act of the Australian correspondent in Asia.⁹⁴

The appropriation of these images as activist campaign materials nonetheless continued throughout the 1980s and beyond. East Timor was still difficult to access; as information was still hard to obtain, these images continued to circulate. They also fitted into a seemingly timeless visual economy of suffering, the contexts and arrangements in which images of suffering are produced, circulated and interpreted.⁹⁵ In 1980, for example, an image of the Laga children was superimposed onto a drawing of a warplane in a report issued by the Clergy and Laity Concerned (CALC), a religious advocacy group in the US.⁹⁶ The two images were placed together in such a way as to infer a relationship between US military aid, human rights abuses, and the plight of the East Timorese children. The same image can also be found in the 1980 pamphlet on the famine, 'Holocaust on the Sly', published by the Dutch East Timor Committee, a group led by university academic W.F. Wertheim, as a contribution to an international solidarity congress on East Timor in Amsterdam.⁹⁷ The photograph appears twice: in its entirety and also cropped showing a close-up of a little boy's face on the cover. The same photograph appears again in campaign materials by the Australian advocacy group Reunite in Australia Families of Timor (RAFT), most likely issued between July 1980 and 1981, captioned generically 'Many want to leave East Timor because of the suffering there'.⁹⁸ RAFT campaigned for East Timorese to be granted visas to enable them to join other family members in Australia.

The photographs also circulated in international forums, as the prospect of another famine loomed in 1982. In November of that year, as he spoke at a

⁹² Rodgers, interviewed by Wilson.

⁹³ Peter Rodgers, 'East Timor: A Continuing Game of Face-Saving?', *SMH*, 6 November 1979, 7.

⁹⁴ Rodgers cited in Tapsell, 31.

⁹⁵ See Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity: Visual Economy in the Andean Image World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8–10.

⁹⁶ 'East Timor: An Act of Genocide', *CALC Report*, Special Issue, 6, no. 2 (March 1980), 1.

⁹⁷ On Wertheim and the Dutch Indonesia Committee, the predecessor of the East Timor Committee, see Jan Breman, 'W.F. Wertheim: A Sociological Chronicler of Revolutionary Change', *Development and Change* 48, no. 5 (2017): 1143.

⁹⁸ 'How Long Must the Families of Timor Stay Separated?', Reunite in Australia the Families of Timor (RAFT), East Timor Ephemera Material Collected by the National Library of Australia, no date.



Figure 5. José Ramos-Horta, UN Decolonisation Committee, 1982. UN Photo/Yutaka Nagata.

session of the UN Fourth Committee on Decolonisation, José Ramos-Horta held up one of the Rodgers photographs as evidence of events in East Timor and urged the territory's decolonisation (Figure 5).⁹⁹ In this way, the photograph resurfaced as an instrument to present a grievance and an injury claim on behalf of the East Timorese people.¹⁰⁰

In the same year, a photograph of the Laga girl in the checked sarong appeared in the Mozambique news magazine *Tempo*, illustrating an article marking the eighth anniversary of the founding of Frelim and calling on the international community, such as Portugal and the Catholic Church, to exert pressure on Indonesia over the issue of East Timor.¹⁰¹ Thus, the photographs circulated in international organisations, and beyond the Western, English-speaking world, such as the former Portuguese colonies Angola and Mozambique, which strongly advocated in the UN for East Timor's right to self-determination.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ 'Six Petitioners Express Views on East Timor in Fourth Committee', UN Fourth Committee 15th Meeting (PM), Press Release GA/D/2383, 8 November 1982, 9, <http://chart-digital.info/files/original/22/629/mgd-b3-1p.2.pdf> (accessed 12 September 2021).

¹⁰⁰ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 143.

¹⁰¹ Alves Gomes, 'Timor: E Tempo de Actuar!', *Tempo*, 23 May 1982, 36–7.

¹⁰² The FRELIMO-led government of Mozambique hosted members of the Frelim Central Committee in exile. Scott, 76.

The possibilities and limitations of photographs

By depicting those who were affected by the famine in East Timor, the images taken by Peter Rodgers illustrate Vernon's contention that photography provides a means to humanise hunger.¹⁰³ However, photographs can also dehumanise their subjects or simplify the causes of the problems being confronted by the subjects.¹⁰⁴ To the extent that Rodgers' images of children came to symbolise famine and the suffering of the East Timorese people, they contributed to depictions of the East Timorese people as helpless and dependent on external assistance. The plight of the East Timorese in the late 1970s reflected the plight of all non-citizens, of Indonesia and of all nations, whose 'emergency claims' go unheeded.¹⁰⁵ The currency of this meaning helps to explain why activists' use of the photographs did not fulfil their objective: an immediate end to Indonesian rule. To the extent that the images depicted East Timorese as 'helpless and dependent', it suggested that they lacked – for now and in the years to come – the capacity for self-determination.

For the next twenty years after their initial publication, the Rodgers photographs formed a key part of the visual imagery used by those who campaigned for East Timorese self-determination. The most well-known of these images depict pain and violence perpetrated against the East Timorese, such as the 1991 Santa Cruz Massacre and the 1997 photographs of Indonesian security forces torturing youths accused of supporting independence.¹⁰⁶ These were smuggled out and circulated internationally for informational and campaigning purposes, with the highest number circulating in the late 1990s. Canadian photographer Elaine Briere had taken, and later released, some photographs of pre-invasion East Timor, which became an iconic part of the self-determination campaign.¹⁰⁷ They depicted the 'halcyon' days of Portuguese Timor as a contrast to life under Indonesian rule.¹⁰⁸

Western activists and East Timorese exiles found, when using these photographs as the basis of their campaigns, that the evidentiary value of photographs is complicated by the fact that they are subject to multiple interpretations. This caused difficulties for campaigners by opening up debates about responsibility and morality in cases of famine. News images such as Rodgers' do not show the actors responsible for the famine. The photographs may nonetheless be

¹⁰³ Vernon, 33.

¹⁰⁴ Lydon, *Flash of Recognition*, 14.

¹⁰⁵ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 198.

¹⁰⁶ McCosker, 59. On the 1997 torture photographs, see Hannah Loney and Annie Pohlman, 'The Sexual and Visual Dynamics of Torture: Analysing Atrocity Photographs from Indonesian-Occupied East Timor', in *Gender, Violence and Power in Indonesia*, eds Katharine McGregor, Ana Dragojlovic and Hannah Loney (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 84–100.

¹⁰⁷ Vincenzo Pietropaolo, 'Elaine Briere: Activist with a Camera', *Point of View*, 12 April 2016, <https://povmagazine.com/elaine-briere-activist-with-a-camera/> (accessed 27 January 2023).

¹⁰⁸ Torelli, 23.

read in the light of the prevailing view in famine scholarship that famine is the product of human action or negligence.¹⁰⁹

Because photographs can be read in different ways when presented in different contexts and to different viewers, their meanings are shaped by the complex intervention of image brokers – that is, by those who create them and circulate them. Pat Walsh, who was awarded an Order of Australia in 2012 for his human rights advocacy work on East Timor, regretted that the Rodgers photographs did not make more impact than they did despite the seriousness of the famine.¹¹⁰ To relieve the famine, a greater intervention involving photographs was needed than that undertaken by Walsh and his counterparts. The secessionist movement in Biafra, for example, employed a Geneva-based public relations firm that funded journalists to cover the war from the Biafran side and to disseminate the resulting stories, images, and films.¹¹¹ Even with such an intervention, images are subject to further elaboration and reworkings in the hands of others, leading to them becoming inscribed with new meanings.

Conclusion

The 1979 Rodgers photographs were early images used in the contestations over East Timor's political status. Their journeys demonstrated 'the complex human network involved in the publication of news images'.¹¹² Activists as image brokers moulded them into evidence of a serious humanitarian catastrophe occurring in East Timor and to argue for international intervention. The impact of these photographs, however, was conditioned by the characteristics of photography as a medium, including the multiple ways in which a photograph could be interpreted, as well as Western support for the Indonesian annexation in the political context of the Cold War. The Rodgers photographs provoked a debate on the famine (whether it existed and if so what caused it) and on the political status of the territory, and though they assumed an ongoing importance in the decades to come, they failed to generate sufficient impact to end the Indonesian annexation in the short term. Photographs can 'fail' from the point of view of the image brokers' intentions and hopes because of the complex environment in which images operate, in which constraints are

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.; on famine as deliberate crime, see Wayne Jordash QC, Catriona Murdoch and Joe Holmes, 'Strategies for Prosecuting Mass Starvation', *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 17, no. 4 (2019): 850.

¹¹⁰ Pat Walsh, personal communication, 2 November 2021. On Walsh's biography, see 'CHART co-founder honoured for Timor work', *Timor Archives*, <https://timorarchives.wordpress.com/2012/01/27/walsh-honoured/> (accessed 10 October 2022).

¹¹¹ Roy Doron, 'Marketing Genocide: Biafran Propaganda Strategies during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–70', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 2–3 (2014): 227–46, doi:10.1080/14623528.2014.936702, 241.

¹¹² Gervais, 489.



Figure 6. A Peter Rodgers photograph denoting forced displacement, surrender and famine on display at the CNC as part of an exhibition on the history of Timor-Leste's independence struggle. Photograph: Raimundo Fraga, CNC.

imposed by broader structural and social factors and the intimate processes of looking at an image.¹¹³ Sustained activism, including the use of more photographs and video imagery, was required for another two decades to challenge the Indonesian annexation, thus showing some of the limitations in the capacity of photographs to unleash serious political change in the short term. Yet, as Kozol has argued, failure itself is politically generative, allowing the creation of 'an ethics of recognition of the humanness of others' and to learn about the limits of the visual in depicting and addressing momentous events such as famine and war.¹¹⁴ Demonstrating this generative capacity, over the next twenty years, the Rodgers photographs became part of a body of contested visual images about East Timor, including those taken by Indonesian army and press photographers to show Indonesian rule in a positive light.¹¹⁵ In the independent state of Timor-Leste, the Rodgers photographs have been used by the transitional justice institution, the CAVR, and the CNC, in projects of reparative visibility in commemorating and representing the Great Famine (as shown in [Figure 6](#)).


¹¹³ Kozol, 19.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Parni Hadi, ed., *East Timor: A Photographic Record* (Jakarta: Antara News Agency, 1992).

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