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## Timor-Leste: When this nun speaks, even rival gangs listen

News Stories, 3 October 2006

DILI, Timor-Leste, October 3 (UNHCR) – As some 200 displaced men and women line up in a queue that snakes along a dusty pot-holed driveway to the steps of the Canossian Sisters of Charity convent, a strapping middle-aged nun takes a microphone and begins issuing instructions.

"Listen, listen, listen, bring your registration cards and listen," Sister Guillermina barks. The men and women who call this compound home in Balide, Dili react quickly – it's time for the daily food distribution that has been keeping them alive since they were chased from their homes by factional violence earlier this year.

The Canossian Sisters' compound has been transformed from a place of worship into a refuge for 2,000 internally displaced Timorese, some of the 150,000 people who fled their homes earlier this year before international peacekeepers were called in to end fighting between factions of the military and police.

Displaced people eager for food are not the only ones who listen to Sister Guillermina – this outspoken and energetic leader of a band of hard-working Timorese Roman Catholic nuns has managed to forge a ground-breaking reconciliation between two of the gangs who had terrorised the capital, Dili, since the eruption of violence in late April, some four years after independence.






Despite the presence of foreign troops, peace has not come as quickly as many hoped to this island state the world's first new country of the 21st century.

As the tiny country prepares for the rainy season, there are still 56 camps around Dili and an unknown number of spontaneous camps in the districts – all housing people too scared to go home. UNHCR has provided tents, plastic sheeting and other non-food items such as kerosene stoves to each of these, and UNHCR site planners have worked to improve drainage systems.



Sister Guillermina of the Canossian Sisters of Charity watches over children whose families have taken refuge in her convent in Dili.

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Though many people still do not trust the fragile peace and remain displaced in the camps, there are some bright spots – like Sister Guillermina's accomplishments in getting rival gangs to talk out their differences.

Gang warfare – characterized by attacks with stones or metal arrows – is one of the most troubling consequences of a long history of east-west division in poverty-stricken Timor-Leste. Gangs, representing either east or west, often burn down the houses of their rivals or terrorise them in the camps.

Three weeks ago the Canossian Sisters' compound became the target of fighting between youths from the Cai-Coli and Rebals Mascarenas areas. The fighting went on for five nights, with displaced families cowering in their tents as stones rained down, and the nuns getting up every few hours to try to calm them. Finally, Sister Guillermina decided to face the gangs herself.

She went back and forth between the two groups trying to get them to listen to reason and put aside their jealousies. "They said to me 'Aah mother only wants to listen to Rebals,' and the Rebals say, 'Aah mother only wants to listen to Cai-Coli'" she recalls. "I ask them to embrace one by one, be a peaceful person, Timor needs peaceful persons. This is the type of people we need for rebuilding."

Official reconciliation came at a weekend ceremony attended by government ministers, police, religious leaders and members of the humanitarian community. The boys linked their arms and shook hands. They apologised and agreed not to fight each other. They then shared a reconciliation meal from the same bowl of rice, using the same spoon, and drank from the same cup of water.

Two weeks later, the gangs are still at peace and Sister Guillermina can concentrate on helping those inside her compound. This is no small task. Rows and rows of UNHCR tents and sheeting line the convent grounds – the tent ropes act as washing lines, their canopies as shelter for preparing evening meals.

Having spent three years managing refugee camps in Bosnia, Sister Guillermina is aware of the complexity of the situation in her own country. "In Bosnia, people are quiet and listen to you, they do what they are asked. Here [in the camp], the majority are illiterate – it makes it very hard for me. I am always talking to the people, and they are very stressed and tired and angry," she says. "I have to solve every individual problem: husband and wife, medical – like they have forgotten how to solve problems themselves."

On the verandah of the Canossian Sisters' compound, young girls sit embroidering altar cloths for the church. Their hands move slowly, careful to keep the material white and their stitches on the mark. As they sew, tiny pink crosses begin to flower on material in their laps. The work takes time, patience and composure, much like the rebuilding of this country.

*By Emily Tannock in Dili, Timor-Leste*

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Democratic Republic of the Congo, more than 100,000 internally displaced Congolese have sought safety in 13 camps run by the UN refugee agency. While the camps provide greater safety, an atmosphere of lawlessness pervades the region. Anyone who ventures outside the camps is a potential victim. In a conflict where rape has become a weapon, women are especially vulnerable.