

Heavy hand of Australian police in Dili

By Lucia Salinas-Briones in Dili

Dili, October 22, 2006: I had been in Dili just five days, it was one of those warm Dili nights and I was pleased when my Timorese friend Ana suggested going to a better spot to admire a magnificent full moon. It was 7.30pm on October 11. We entered the seaside road, a mix of beautiful large old-style Portuguese houses - all embassies - and a few empty sites with impressive development plans on display.

We were probably going at 60 kms per hour when we passed a car parked on the side of the road, its lights off. As we passed it, a hand popped out from the passenger window, indicating authoritatively for us to stop. Immediately five men surrounded our car - we were confronted by Australian police on duty.

One asked Ana for her driving license in English. Assuming he was being understood he asked again in English if Ana didn't know that the speed limit in the streets of Dili was 45 kms per hour. A concerned Ana tells me to translate that there is no speed limit in Dili - "tell him that I live here and we don't have a speed limit". Ignoring my translation, he shouted back, asking whether that was Ana's car.

I told him he was not been very kind and asked him to show me where the speed limit sign was as I could not see it. His answer was embarrassing: - "I am telling you that you can only drive at 45 kms per hour. You act as if we didn't have much to do here. On top of everything now we have to educate these people. They don't even know how to drive! Now tell your friend that she will go to court, she might end up in jail. C'mon, tell her!"

Ana's reply was very clear - they can take her to court! She was Timorese and knew very well that there is no speed limit in the streets of Timor Leste. Actually there is an official limit of 45 kms per hour, but there are no signs and few people are aware of it.

Perhaps common sense kicked in because he then let us go. By then Ana was very angry and wondered what was the real reason for all the abuse we were exposed to.

I was furious for the patronizing attitude of these police, and wondered if all Australian police in Timor behave like that. Why are they so aggressive to locals? Will this escalate to equal the way American soldiers behave in Iraq? Is Australia sending troops into Timor Leste to help with the process or to abuse Timorese people? What's 'the job' here? They couldn't stop the accused and convicted when they escaped from prison right under their noses. Instead, they go around controlling speed limits in a country where speed limits don't really exist.

My shock continued when a Portuguese friend told me that he has been stopped twice by the Australian Army and they were so rude and aggressive to him that he had put in a formal complaint.

This morning Isidoro, another Timorese friend, told me that as he was coming to meet me he saw a big fight in the street between two gangs at Comoro. They were hitting and stoning each other while the Australian police and Army stood there and watched. Why didn't they do anything to stop the violence, he asked? After Isidoro left it was reported that this fight - provoked by the discovery of two headless bodies - was eventually broken up and many were arrested.

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