

Key points:

- A Bega Valley advocacy group has supported Timor-Leste since 2004 after the country gained independence
- The NGO fostered people-to-people relationships and assisted a sub-region of Timor-Leste to rebuild
- The two communities have a vision for an international festival of choirs

Then, a small farming community in south-east Australia mobilised to help the East Timorese rebuild their country and build a new nation.

David Gallan is the president of the non-government organisation Bega Valley Advocates for Timor-Leste.

He said that many in the Bega Valley community were aware that Timorese villagers had helped Australian soldiers [fight the Japanese forces during World War II](#).

Japanese forces that were sweeping towards Australia came up against Australian commandos in East Timor, who withdrew to the mountains to fight a guerilla campaign against a far larger Japanese force.

"They guided the Australian commandos; interpreted for them; led them to villages where they could obtain food; they carried supplies and it was one of the great military feats of Australian history," Mr Gallan said.

"Unfortunately, at great cost to the Timorese people.

"Upwards of 20 per cent of the population one in 5 were killed through the reprisals.

"Australia owed a debt of honour."

Determined to fight for freedom

Timor-Leste returned to being a Portuguese colony after the Japanese left at the end of World War II, but it was invaded again in 1975, this time by Indonesia.

Abel Guterres, then a 19-year-old, escaped to Australia just before the Indonesian invasion, leaving his family behind.

"My dad and other brothers and sisters were killed," he said.

"It was sad because you cannot know what exactly happened, but then equally you are determined to fight; fight for freedom."

Mr Guterres remained in Australia as an activist and ultimately became Timor-Leste's first Consul General to Australia.

In 2010, he was appointed the Ambassador of Timor-Leste to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji, a role he has recently retired from, and has been the liaison to connect the Bega Valley group with a remote community in Timor-Leste.

Mr Guterres also established a number of other friendship groups that connected Australian and Timor-Leste communities.

Hundreds of thousands lost to war

Mr Gallan says that the relationship that Bega Valley group has with Timor-Leste is very different to that of other aid organisation as it focuses on fostering people-to-people relationships.

"We went there to listen and to help where we could," he said.

"We want to leave some sort of substantial legacy that is practical and is useful for the people in the local community."

When the organisation was established it found a country left in ruins, needing not only to rebuild but needing to establish a new government.

"We lost almost a quarter of a million people. Every single person in East Timor was touched by the war," Mr Guterres said.

"Virtually everything was destroyed, there was no bureaucracy, so we had to build everything.

"The thing was that we were free. So we worked; to build a country [and to] build a state."

Rebuilding a community, celebrating together

Every year members of the Bega Valley group travel to Timor-Leste's Bariki-Natarbora sub-district to help with rebuilding schools, health programs, agriculture and small businesses.

The group focuses on transferring the skills and resources of one rural community to another in order to build independence and sustainability.

Children who attended the rebuilt schools grew up to be provided with training to support them to become the new generation of teachers.

And they celebrated with song and music.

"Music makes you happy, music gives you peace and that sense of living in harmony with your neighbour and your friends and with your environment," Mr Guterres said.

Dave Crowden is part of the Bega Valley group and is also a professional musician and educator.

He organised for hundreds of musician instruments to be sent over to the community, and in 2019 he arranged for a combined Bega Valley choir to tour the rough tracks and remote villages of the region.

"Every one of these concerts we played at became big community events," Mr Crowden said.

Vision of an international choral festival

A return visit by a Timor-Leste choir to the Bega Valley was postponed earlier this year, but the Bega Valley choir tour was so successful that the group has an even bigger vision.

"I envisage that maybe one day there would be an International choir festival in Timor," Mr Crowden said.

"Can you imagine; you have a choir from different countries?" Mr Guterres said.

"Maybe some group from the Pacific, some group from Asia, Japan, or Korea, or India, or even Afghanistan."

Mr Guterres sums up the proposal in the same spirit that has brought the friendship this far: "You sow seed on fertile ground it will grow."