

Bali after the Bomb, October 2002

"CAN COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE BE PREVENTED?"

For the past three years the PsychoPolitical Peace Institute (www.pppi.net) has been engaged in Bali, Indonesia, with its new approach to the prevention of collective violence. A long term approach is also being taught regularly in seminars in Switzerland. Dr. Margret Rueffler is presently in Bali in an effort to support the local people in the aftermath of the explosion on October 12 in Kuta.

From the air, approaching the landing strip of the Ngura Rai airport in Denpasar, Bali, one could already perceive the depression engulfing the Island. Usually, a crowd of smiling faces greet visitors upon disembarking. Now the faces looked sad. The famous Balinese smile was missing. The bomb seems to have hit each Balinese in the heart, leaving a deep wound. The feeling was that the bomb crater had torn into the heart of the Island.

Walking through the streets, going food shopping in the supermarket, I was met with shy glances, where I usually was greeted with a big friendly smile. I had the impression each Balinese felt personally responsible and embarrassed for what had happened to their guests, and for not being able to protect them.

The Sanglah hospital, where the burned victims were being cared for, located in the capital of Denpasar about one hour from Kuta, where the devastating bomb exploded, was full of relatives and families gathered in the hallways.

I had been invited to join the psychological crisis team at the hospital to care for the badly burnt Indonesians. The intensive care unit, provisionally equipped, is caring for approximately twenty-two badly injured Indonesian and Balinese victims.

Head, mouth and hands covered with sterile protection, I entered the ward sweltering in 36° degree heat. I took a few deep breaths before turning to one of the severely burnt human beings.

What could I do here? I spoke to several of the patients, to those who were able and wanted to speak. With their permission, I introduced a few simple relaxation techniques to activate their self-healing powers and calm their racing heart beats. It was gratefully accepted. The heat was repressive. Here and there, I wiped a forehead that was not burned with a wet towel. Arms, legs, back, faces - burns and injuries everywhere.

A local university asked me to assist a newly created team by sharing my experience dealing with collective trauma and prevention of violence. The present plan is to develop a long term approach to the incredible psychological damage caused by the bomb. First a hotline will be created. A team of psychologists and therapists will be available to deal with the aftermath of the psychological effects.

First in line are the people who were directly exposed to the explosion.

After the explosion, many volunteers gathered to help on the spot. Innumerable helpers, especially young people, students, helped to transport and wrap the already decomposing victims and torn apart humans in plastic bags. They were deeply traumatized and need to be made aware that help is being made available for them, too.

It is important to reach those in need in order to assist them in digesting what happened and also to reach out to the families of the traumatized victims directly exposed to the bomb. Next, the plan is to support the larger population to deal with the collective trauma and depression.

Wherever I go across the Island, people are deeply shocked and depressed about this act of terror done to their visitors and guests of the Island. At the same time the frightening recognition is dawning that the main source of income for most of the population, tourism, has been destroyed for some time to come. This means that many people in Bali will go hungry.

The already existing tensions between multi-ethnic minorities that have immigrated to the island may increase because the fight for survival is becoming much harder.

The project is developing in collaboration with the university, now in the planning stages, is geared toward long term healing of collective trauma and the prevention of collective violence.

Bali and the local population can be supported in different ways. Most urgent is that tourists who planned to come Christmas do so. I believe that Bali will be one of the safest places in the world at this time. The bomb has already exploded and the goal desired by the terrorists has been achieved.

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The island of Bali is a very special place and the Balinese are a very special people, inimitably graceful, practicing their very special brand of the Hindu religion. Therefore, the aftermath of the collective trauma caused by the bomb explosion is also being handled in a very special way.

Every day, in many of the villages, purification blessing and healing ceremonies are formally conducted by the priests in the presence of the whole village - chanting, praying and making offerings to the gods of the island.

The leader of Banjar A in Kuta, where we have several programs in a slum area, told me over and over, "The gods must have wanted it, otherwise it could not have happened. We are so embarrassed to have been unable to protect our guests and visitors."

I learned later, that the explosives used, C4, TNT and RDX, the three bombs that exploded simultaneously, cause something similar to radioactive fallout with long term consequences to the skin. A large increase of skin disease is expected for the next few years.

I was also informed that by the end of October over 60% of the workers in the tourist sector would be laid off. This does not account yet for all these who are illegally working here..

The main street of Kuta is nearly empty, walking toward the bomb site. Balinese sitting at the steps of their stores or on the sidewalk look at me, a white person, walking by. A few hesitant approaches, "Do you need a taxi?" etc...

The area is cordoned off, with huge excavators on the street. I am allowed to enter the area to take a picture of the wreaths, countless wreaths laid down on the sidewalk. A white man carefully pulls out a single wreath and straightens out the writing on a piece of fabric: "Dear Laura, You will never be gone. We will meet you again in the other world. Mom and Pop.

The place has an eerie stillness about it, in spite of the huge excavator. Right next to it, a large group of Balinese in traditional ceremonial garb hold a ceremony.

The Balinese who died in the accident and the body parts that could be found were packaged in bags and returned to their respective villages. Each Balinese is embedded in his Banjar, village unit, even while living in the city or on another island. After death, his spirit is called back to his village by the priest or Brahman and he is cremated in a most elaborate ceremony. Now, after the bomb, with bodies and parts of bodies missing, the villages have a great dilemma. In order for the person to reincarnate

again properly, all of the body has to be cremated. With parts of bodies missing, the belief is that this person cannot incarnate in a whole body. Some villages have decided not to open the bags with the remains in order not to have to confront this dilemma. In other villages the missing parts are restructured with clay in order to allow the person a proper incarnation.

During my regular visit with the rector of Warmadewa University, I had to walk through a large group of students. They seemed somehow surprised to see me, a white woman. They asked me several times, "Aren't you scared to come here with the bomb?" I answered, "No, the bomb has already exploded, why should I be scared? The terrorists already achieved their goal to scare the whole world."

The rector appreciated my coming to Bali in such a difficult time. And so I went on and on... While I worked therapeutically with some Balinese, I realized that the fear was pressing on their hearts. I showed them how to turn toward themselves in a loving way, hold their hearts, and release the pain and fear. They were most grateful to be able to have their breath deepen and their chest expand again.

PsychoPolitical Peace Institute is setting up a new approach to deal with post trauma and the prevention of violence with the psychological faculty at Ubaya University in Surabaya. We plan to develop a long term approach to preventing violence and posttrauma in large groups.

PsychoPolitical Peace Institute supports psychological groups and individuals through the Balinese Foundation Lagu Damai - your contribution is welcome.

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