

MEDIA RELEASE: Tuesday, December 8, 2015

MEAA and Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA join forces to advance journalism in East Timor

Today, on the 40th anniversary of the murder of Australian journalist Roger East in Dili in 1975, the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance is announcing an expansion of its planned scholarship program for East Timorese journalists.

The program will be renamed the Balibo Five-Roger East Fellowship and will be run jointly with Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA, the Australian union movement's global solidarity organisation.

The scope of the fellowship will also be broadened to support investigative journalism projects in East Timor, along with the opportunity for East Timorese journalists to study or gain further experience in Australia.

The Balibo Five-Roger East Fellowship has been established to honour the memory of the six Australian journalists killed in East Timor in 1975, and to improve the quality and skill of journalism in East Timor.

Five young journalists working for Australia's Seven and Nine networks – reporter Greg Shackleton, camera operator Gary Cunningham, sound recordist Tony Stewart (all from Seven), reporter Malcolm Rennie and camera operator Brian Peters (both from Nine) – were killed in the village of Balibo after witnessing an incursion by Indonesian soldiers on October 16, 1975. Their killers have never been brought to justice.

Freelance reporter Roger East, a stringer for the ABC and AAP who provided the first confirmed accounts of the killing of the Balibo Five, was executed by Indonesian troops on Dili Wharf on December 8. His body fell into the sea and was never recovered.

MEAA chief executive officer Paul Murphy said Roger East played a crucial role in informing the world about the invasion of East Timor in 1975.

Mr Murphy said the partnership between MEAA and Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA would help to ensure the Balibo Five-Roger East Fellowship was successful in achieving its objectives.

He also welcomed the support of editorial staff at Fairfax Media through their More Than Words workplace giving program, which has raised significant funds for training and equipment for journalists in East Timor over many years.

"We are very excited about the potential of the Balibo Five-Roger East Fellowship as a vehicle to not only build journalism skills in East Timor, but to promote a more robust free press there," Mr Murphy said.

“The involvement of Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA will not only strengthen the delivery of the program on the ground in East Timor, but will allow it to be expanded to include funding for serious, in-depth journalism as well as study and work experience in Australia.

“This will help to fill a gap in East Timor’s media and in turn improve democracy and corporate and government accountability there.

“We are thankful for the work that has already been done in this area by Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA and the Fairfax workplace giving program which means we can hit the ground running.”

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA executive director Kate Lee said the agency had a long history of involvement in development projects in East Timor and would administer the fellowship through its office in Dili.

“Australian unions have long supported Timor Leste via Union Aid Abroad – first in the struggle for independence and later through development of skills for a strong robust economy and society,” she said.

“We are excited to work in this new venture with MEAA and the families of the Balibo Five – for a skilled journalism workforce and for the press freedoms essential for democracy in Timor”.

It is expected that the first applications for the Balibo Five-Roger East Fellowship will open early in 2016.

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