Saturday Telegraph Magazine **11 October 2003**

Years of Living Dangerously by Claire Scobie

President Xanana Gusmao, poet and former guerilla, is idolised as the man who delivered East Timor from years of brutal oppression. Now he faces a new fight: to cling on to the brittle peace he has brought to his country. Claire Scobie meets him on the eve of his first state visit to Britain.

In Dili, the capital of East Timor, the statue of Christ is a landmark. Built in 1996 on a rocky outcrop, at 27 metres tall it is a powerful symbol of salvation. Erected to mark 20 years of East Timor's status as Indonesia's 27th province, it was another futile attempt to win over the defiant East Timorese people to the illegal occupation of their country. Three years later East Timor won it's freedom, and last year it became the world's newest nation. This probably would never have happened without Xanana Gusmao, a charismatic combination of poet warrior and rebel leader, who for 14 years led the resistance, until he was captured and imprisoned in 1992. Today he is President.

Respected by world leaders from Kofi Annan to Bill Clinton. and described by Nelson Mandela - with whom he is often compared - as a 'remarkable individual', in East Timor Xanana is lionised as a beacon of hope, a saviour of the nation. Elevated to an iconic status reminiscent of Che Guevara, his image adorns T-shirts and the faces of watches; there is a public Xanana Reading Room, and posters from this presidential campaign two years ago are still kept as talisman's in people's homes. The image on the poster - the greying beard and the sympathetic tilt of his head - lends Xanana the air of martyr, so it is particularly fitting that from his residence there is a direct view of the statue.

Yet, while his life may have been one of sacrifice to the freedom of his country, in person Xanana is a flamboyant, striking figure with a commanding air. He greets me warmly with a kiss on both cheeks. His forehead is furrowed, his eyes the colour of dark chocolate, the teeth stained with tobacco (he is a committed smoker). When he talks he fixes you with a deep, steady gaze,; but under the eyes are heavy bags. he looks tired, but given his packed schedule it is hardly surprising. Next week, on the president's first state visit to Britain, he is due to meet Tony Blair and the Queen.

Considering the key role that Britain played in Xanana's release from prison in 1999 (when he was given sanctuary in the British Embassy in Jakarta) and its general financial support to date, the meeting with Blair is particularly significant. As the issue of ongoing UN assistance to Timor is due to be discussed this month, Xanana plans to ask the British Government to exert it's leverage within the Security Council. 'But I believe that before going to Buckingham Palace I will be nervous,' Xanana says, laughing. His voice is rich and heavily accented; when he grapples for the right words (English is his fourth language) a look of frustration comes across his face.

It is a hot Sunday afternoon in early September. The air is thick, syrupy. This equatorial half-island, not much larger than Northern Ireland, with a population of 800,000, lies 300 miles north of Australia. On my arrival in Dili, a bombed-out, low-rise city, the president's press adviser, Elizabeth Exposto, drives me up a pot-holed road, dodging goats, children and naked children,

to the president's home, situated in the hills below the city. Palms and banana trees sway gently around a collection of modest whitewashed bungalows with cherry-red roofs; security guards salute us at the gate, staff tend the garden. The President and his first lady, in shorts and flip-flops, are playing with their children by the fishpond.

While they go inside to change, I sit on the veranda overlooking a garden newly planted with bougainvillea and sunflowers. Inside, their sitting-room with its white walls and tiled floor is simply decorated: a plastic baby chair, family photos on a bookshelf, and brown leather sofas facing a large television (the president spends his evenings watching sport).

Xanana reappears wearing biscuit-coloured trousers and a checked shirt; his wife, Australian-born Kirsty Sword, in cotton trousers and a claret shirt, is serene and self composed. With high cheekbones, a freckled nose and a beatific smile, she has dancers legs (from her younger years training to be a ballerina) and thick blonde hair which falls naturally around her shoulders.

On first impressions Xanana, 57, and Kirsty, 37, seem an unlikely couple. Observing them with their two boys - Alexandre, aged three, with a mop of mousey-blond curls, and one-year-old Kay Olok, who looks more Timorese - you would never imagine the difficult circumstances in which their relationship developed. When they first met in 1994, Xanana was in prison charged with subversion; Kirsty was working for the clandestine East Timorese independence movement in Jakarta. A romance, the start of which was marked by letters smuggled through prison bars, culminated three years ago in a traditional Timorese wedding.

While the couple first began to fall in love through their correspondence, 'there were many times when I questioned if I was being realistic,'Kirsty says, 'as we could not put the relationship to the test.' But, after one 'amazing, special' meeting in 1994 when, during the prison visit, Kirsty managed to meet Xanana in person for the first time, they began to discuss marriage. Kirsty already knew of Xanana's reputation as a heroic leader but it was his 'humour' and 'joie de vivre' that attracted her. She knew that marrying 'the father of a nation' would never be easy, but despite the sacrifices she has made 'my roots are now firmly anchored in East Timor, a country that I love and have passionately fought for'.

Their children are trilingual: in Portuguese (a vestige of colonial times), English and Tetum, and while Kirsty takes them to Australia twice a year, Timor is definitely their home. 'This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed at home,' Kirsty giggles as she pulls Alexandres toes. 'And this one went wee-wee all the way home,' continues the former guerilla fighter, cooing over his son with obvious affection. In the time I spent with East Timor's president and first lady I had to constantly remind myself of the experiences they have lived through, and continue to live with. Xanana's path to the presidency is one of those stories of rare courage and determination: testament to the indestructibility of the human spirit.

Born in 1946 'on a small hill scorched by the sun' in rural East Timor, Jose Alexandre Gusmao (Xanana is his nom de guerre) had a difficult childhood. One of eight children, like a majority of Timorese today he lived in a simple thatched house with no electricity or running water. At 13, his father, a teacher, sent Jose to a strict seminary. He left after three years. The seminary said to me, "You are not going to be a priest," 'Xanana laughs robustly. 'I was not a very good seminarian.' Preferring to write poetry than mutter prayers, Jose then studied in school at Dili, excelling in sport especially football. His education was interrupted by a lack of finances but he studied at night school working in various odd professions - as a fisherman, a typist, a

civil servant - before doing national service. In 1969, he married Emilia Batista and had two children, a son, Nito, and daughter, Zeni. (Emilia and the children moved to Australia in 1990; today Nito lives in one of the bungalows at the president's residence, but Kirsty says they hardly see him as 'he has his own life'; Zeni is in Portugal. Xanana is now helping Emilia to set up an orphanage in Timor.)

In 1975, as an anti-colonial unrest fomented, a Left-wing coup in Portugal forced the decolonisation of Timor, and there was a brief civil war among fledgling political parties. That November, the Marxist Fretilin party, which Xanana had joined, declared East Timor independent. Within days, President Suharto of Indonesia, with the tacit agreement of the US government, invaded. Over the next 24 years, at least 200,000 East Timorese died, many from famine; villages were scorched with napalm; and in Indonesian-run camps, women were forced to be sterilised. 'Of course, it was the Indonesians that made me want to fight,' Xanana says. 'The invasion and occupation forced us to unite.'

When the Indonesians invaded, thousands of civilians and 20,000 soldiers of the Falintil resistance army fled to the thickly forested mountains. After Indonesia's 'Campaign of Annihilation' between 1977 and 1979, the Falintil was reduced to just a few hundred. All the original leaders had been killed and Xanana Gusmao, still a junior, was one of the few left. He and his men were corralled on Matebian - 'the mountain of death'- when he ordered them to break through enemy lines and reorganise, or face decimation.

This was Xanana's darkest period: it was his 'long march', one that would earn him the heroic status he still holds among the East Timorese today. Suffering chronic kidney pain and malaria, surviving on dog meat and plants ha had foraged from the forest, Xanana would walk from village to village under the cover of darkness to find out whether the Timorese wanted to continue the war or give up. 'Don't ever surrender. You are our only hope,' would come the reply.

'By 1979 the resistance had been thoroughly destroyed. The way Xanana Gusmao reorganised it from nothing was truly epic,' says Dr Jose Ramos-Horta, 54, a close comrade of Xanana's, who was later awarded the Nobel Peace prize. 'One requires tremendous willpower, faith and naivety to believe that you can resurrect the people, the movement and continue the struggle. Xanana was the one who did it, no one else.'

After the invasion, Xanana's wife, Emilia, stayed with the children in Dili while he fought in the jungle. Initially under house arrest, she was, like so many Timorese women, used as a weapon of war, humiliated and raped. She was forced to live with a succession of Indonesian officers and had one child that died at birth. When, in 1990, Emilia was allowed to leave with her children for Australia, she had not seen Xanana for 15 years. In an attempt to 'normalise the life in the jungle,' Xanana says, married men were allowed to remarry and in the late 1970s he married a resistance fighter, Felicidade. They, too, were separated by the conflict and for several years, she was imprisoned. Today she lives in Dili.

From his straw hut in the jungle, constantly on the run from the Indonesians and living in basic conditions, Xanana survived on buffalo he had hunted, cigarettes, and food from the villagers. In East Timor the rebels were referred to as 'orangutan' - 'men of the forest'. He kept in touch with world events by listening to the radio: 'We started to see dictatorships around the world disintegrate one by one,' he recalls. 'All we needed was determination and perseverance.'

He admits that he did make 'many mistakes, even crimes' during the war but says, 'If there was something I could blame myself for it was that I could not give enough ammunition, weapons to my people to prevent them from dying. Before the war I read many books on the moral responsibility of war, but in war you have a moral obligation to command your people to go and maybe to die.' In 1981, Xanana reorganised the Fretilin party into a nationalist movement, embracing all the disparate groups.

By the mid- 1980s, students and human rights activists had begun to take up the cause of East Timor. In 1985, while Kirsty Sword was studying languages (majoring in Indonesian) at Monash University in Melbourne, she started to mix with members of the Timorese resistance, even translating some of Xanana's letters. She was taught her first words of Indonesian by her father, Brian, a primary school headmaster. As a family they always took great interest in Asia and politics; her mother, Rosalie, a retired teacher, marched against the Vietnam war; Brian took Kirsty and her brother on holidays to Bali and Jakarta. 'As a teenager I fell in love with Indonesia and was always saving up to go back,' Kirsty says.

In contrast to Xanana's upbringing, the Swords had a normal, happy life in Bendigo, a large country town in central Victoria; Kirsty enjoyed ballet, swimming and being 'in the bush'. In 1991, after finishing college, Kirsty joined Refugee's Study Programme on Oxford. She was approached by Yorkshire Television to work as a researcher on 'Cold Blood', a documentary about the Timorese struggle for Independence. In her research, she spent five weeks in East Timor interviewing pro-independence supporters. A few weeks later many of those whom she met were killed when Indonesian troops opened fire on a peaceful demonstration in a Dili grave yard. Images of the Santa Cruz massacre, captured on film and smuggled out, stunned the outside world, and 'left a deep impression' on Kirsty. She then resolved to 'contribute in an active way to the struggle'. The following spring she moved to Jakarta to work as an English teacher and aid worker, and began working for the underground under the nom de guerre of Ruby Blade (after Sword). Under President Suharto there was a climate of paranoia, repression. If you mentioned East Timor at a glamorous cocktail party, Kirsty says, 'people would turn away from you; you were immediately a social leper'.

Later that same year, Xanana was captured by the Indonesians. He was found, according to one report, 'in a safe house on the outskirts of Dili, in a concealed room beneath floorboards after one of his drivers was tortured'. According to Amnesty International, Xanana was held in military custody for seventeen days, and was 'believed to have been subjected to psychological ill-treatment in the form of sleep deprivation' to prevent him giving an adequate defence plea.

During his trial, branded a sham by human rights observers, Xanana took the opportunity to denounce the genocidal brutality of the Indonesian invasion, in front of Western media. His sentence of life imprisonment on charges of subversion and illegal possession of fire-arms was later reduced to 20 years. After first being interrogated on a daily basis, he was forced to share a cell with a convicted criminal suffering from highly infectious hepatitis B. He spent his time in solitary confinement and went on hunger strike until he was transferred as a political prisoner to a 'conventional cell' in Cipinang prison, where he spent his time studying English and law, writing poetry and painting watercolours. But Xanana, with Kirsty Sword acting as his go-between and Jose Ramos-Horta as his 'voice', continued to mastermind the resistance from his prison cell.

The improbable street sign -John F Kennedy Boulevard- outside Dr Ramos Horta's traditional thatched Timorese house somewhat encapsulates the paradoxes of the man himself, who numbers among his friends the Dalai Lama and Kerry Kennedy, the daughter of Robert F Kennedy (who gave Ramos Horta the sign). A man of immense gravitas, with a priests face, greying stubble and round glasses, Ramos Horta, now foreign minister, offers me Timorese coffee (one of the country's few exports).

'In 1994, Xanana had the audacity to arrange through Kirsty, to have a lap top smuggled into the prison' he said. 'What was funny is that he had just come from the jungle to a prison in a third-world country and he was talking about internet stuff that I wasn't familiar with.'

Once Xanana had befriended the -easily corruptible- guards, he wrote to Kirsty asking her to work for him. 'Kirsty Sword was one of our very best activists,' Ramos Horta said. 'If you look at her she doesn't look like a communist rebel -she always dresses up. The Indonesians wouldn't be suspicious. She was very discrete, meticulous, in the organisation.' Kirsty began a dangerous double life, organising pro-independent protests and 'waltzing into five star hotels to deliver reports on torture to UN officials'.

Jakarta was a mysterious place where people routinely disappeared- so Kirsty could never allow her two worlds to collide. In 1996, having spent 3 and a half years working clandestinely, Kirsty's cover was suddenly blown. She was due to leave the country anyway but 'was a hundred percent sure' that the Indonesian military was aware of her travel plans, so she rapidly moved out of her house. 'It was a hairy week. I had dengue fever, I was hiding out, and had to flight out via Ambon and then on to Bali. I am sure if I had stuck to my original plan the military would have been waiting for me at the airport. Luckily all my documents were shipped out to Australia.' If she had been caught, she would have been 'subjected to some unpleasant questioning', possibly jail, but instead was blacklisted. Within months, however, Kirsty was back in Indonesia, under a new name and with a new passport, this time working for Australian Volunteers International.

By 1998, wide social unrest and chaos in the Indonesian economy had forced President Suharto to resign, and the possibility of autonomy in East Timor was beginning to be openly discussed. As Xanana was considered the lynch-pin of negotiations over the future of East Timor, by May that year, although still in prison, he was allowed to meet with Western media and diplomats. 'Xanana didn't have a beer gut then, he was sylph like and played football regularly, ' remembers Hamish Daniel, now British Ambassador in Timor. 'He was a gentleman in the wisest sense of the word; a very deep-thinking, forward-looking person who studied peace and reconciliation in prison.'

The following March the new Indonesian president, BJ Habibie, surprised everyone when he announced that Indonesia would grant East Timor independence if through popular consultation the majority of Timorese rejected autonomy. The occupation was not only a huge drain on Indonesia's resources, but there was growing international pressure to resolve Timor's future and for Xanana's release, both from the international community and within Indonesia itself. In February 1999, having served seven years of his sentence, Xanana was released from prison, but kept under house arrest.

Xanana and Kirsty were reunited (immediately after his release) and she became his secretary. But, Kirsty says, '1999 was an amazingly taxing emotional year. We would work till 4 am. Our personal life and aspirations just went on hold.'

In the build up to the August ballot and immediately afterwards, the Indonesian-led militia orchestrated a deliberate and violent campaign of intimidation and provocation. As stipulated by the UN, which had agreed to oversee the forthcoming referendum, and to avert a civil war, Xanana, as commander of the Falintil, ordered his men not to retaliate. Meanwhile priests were being massacred, grenades thrown into orphanages. With the announcement that 78 per cent of the Timorese had voted for independence, the situation dramatically deteriorated. The UN was forced to withdraw, 1,000 were killed and 300,000 Timorese were forced out of the country.

While East Timor was rapidly being quashed Xanana was released into UN custody and taken to the British Embassy. Under intense pressure from the international community, Indonesia agreed to allow UN peacekeeping forces back into Timor. Xanana was taken to the UN compound in the middle of the night by tank. The following morning, at the daily meeting held to deal with the emergency situation, 'Xanana walked in wearing full fatigues and beret to numbed silence,' one of the UN personnel present recalls. 'As no one took the initiative, he picked up the agenda and went through it meticulously: water, electricity, roads all needed to be attended, and then he came to the point of graves and where to bury the scores of victims. It was only then that Xanana broke down. "My people," he cried, and he didn't stop crying those days.'

'When I came back, I knew I would face this sad reality but I couldn't imagine the magnitude of destruction,' Xanana says. 'Dili was still smoking. Signs of violence were everywhere. It was so sad, so sad.'

On October 23, Xanana made his first public appearance back in Timor; thousands of Timorese gave him an ecstatic and tearful welcome. At first people were silent, then a wave of sorrow rippled through the crowd as man and women sobbed openly. Xanana, his voice cracking with emotion, pleaded with his people to forgive and promised to rebuild East Timor from the ashes.

Unlike post-war Iraq, where an infrastructure, however battered, has survived, in East Timor there were no rehabilitation plans I place. But a semblance of normality is slowly returning. Sergio Viera de Mello (who was killed by a terrorist bomb in Baghdad in August this year) skillfully headed the UN interim administration overseeing the country's transition to democracy. In August 2000, Xanana retired as commander of the Falintil forces so he could devote himself to guiding the country towards national unity, and that November he became speaker of the National Council, a legislative body of the transitional administration and a precursor to the Timorese parliament. However, he made much of his reluctance to run for the presidency, declaring he was 'first and foremost a guerilla fighter who wanted to retire from political life and grow pumpkins'. But, with no other obvious candidate, and much 'international pressure', he won 83 per cent of the vote in April 2002. He was sworn into the power on May 20 when East Timor officially celebrated its independence amid rapturous celebrations attended by 80 foreign dignitaries.

Today, despite some UN presence, the mood on the Dili streets is calm. But last December, amid growing disillusionment with the government, overly high expectations, and drought in the countryside, the country suffered the worst violence since independence, leaving two dead and the prime minister's house razed to the ground. The Palace of Ashes, as the presidency is known , is, like many buildings in Dili, a shell; the walls are blackened, with only rough plywood

partitions dividing its offices. Xanana has left it unrenovated to show that he needs no privileges. Although his presidency gives him only limited constitutional power, Xanana does have the power of veto over laws and he is still commander of the armed forces.

Xanana is tired - much more so these days, he says, than when he was a commander in the jungle. He is on the third day of a visit to remote villages; as part of his 'open presidency' he spends half his time on the road. 'I have dialogue with the people, to know their doubts, and convey to the prime minister their desires, aspirations, difficulties,' he sighs. 'In some sense the process of struggle and fight was easier then. Now we are obliged to make laws, plans to improve economics, agriculture, education, justice, army, police. It is so complex to start a country from scratch.' A shadow of disbelief crosses his face. '"We suffered, " the people say, "and now we don't have jobs, we don't have education."'

At each village, Xanana is given an effusive welcome: the chiefs, dressed in traditional costumes with headresses and goat hair wrapped around their ankles, stamp their feet, chant and bang drums. Part preacher, part stand-up comedian, part statesman, Xanana holds the audience of more than a 1,000 locals in the palm of his hand, the children at his feet scarcely fidget. He encourages them to think about reconciliation not revenge; listens to their problems, offers soothing words of advice. He is a fluent, inspirational orator who skillfully engages and orchestrates the crowd.

They clearly adore him. 'People love Xanana,' one younger woman tells me with tears in her eyes. 'He gave us the freedom.' The chief of the village Joao Periera, his teeth stained with betelnut, says, 'We are so happy he has come to our village. In my heart I know that only he can bring peace to our country.'

The recipient of numerous human rights awards, Xanana has vigorously taken up the banner of reconciliation, so he can steer East Timor towards a stable future and nurture diplomatic relations with his former enemy, Indonesia. So far only 18 people have been tried in connection with the violence of 1999; most of those have been acquitted or given lenient sentences for crimes against humanity. Human rights observers have dismissed the process as a sham. But there are fears that when the UN pulls out next year, violence will erupt, especially along the border regions with West Timor where up to 30,000 still languish in refugee camps. Xanana argues that he doesn't deny the need for justice, but that it is more important to strengthen the state and parliament, so people can 'benefit from independence' and move on in their lives.

Such a forgiving attitude can be hard to bear, says Kirsty, who admits to moments of "feeling bitter and twisted'. In 2001, Kirsty set up the Aloha Foundation (Ireland's former president Mary Robinson is a patron) in response to the rape and kidnapping of 14-year-old Juliana de Santos, taken by a militia leader as a 'war prize' in 1999. Juliana, whose nickname is Aloha, is being held in West Timor; all efforts for her release have stalled. The foundation has become an umbrella NGO for women traumatised from decades of being used as 'weapons of war' and marginalised in this conservative, patriarchal society. And Kirsty has become a figurehead for East Timor's fractured women's network. (Perhaps in a gesture of solidarity - although her friends thought her mad - she gave birth to her first child, Alexandre, in the Dili National Hospital so her and Xanana's first child would be born on Timorese soil. The protracted labour took place in a room usually reserved for rape victims, she laughs, 'kind of significant given my concerns'.)

When I meet Kirsty at the Aloha Foundation, she looks svelte in a black skirt and beaded

sandals, with her hair pulled tightly back from her face. The disarming nature that worked in Kirsty's favour during the resistance belies her deep inner convictions; under the gentle smile is a woman unafraid to speak out. She hands-on role at work - she raises funds, visits villages and only last week helped a woman and her five children fleeing from her violent husband (domestic violence is rife in Timor). Her open-plan office, unlike Xanana's, is newly decorated; on the wall is a portrait of the Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whom Kirsty counts among her role models. But the first lady, a title she is not altogether comfortable with, dismisses any notion of her own heroism: 'What I did in the resistance did require a certain amount of courage, I suppose. But I never considered it to be particularly extraordinary. I was brought up with a social conscience that you speak the truth and you defend what is right. And it was patently clear to me that this (East Timor) was a just cause.'

Talking to her it strikes one that Kirsty fell in love with a romantic figure who matched her own ideals and aspirations, but the realities of life in East Timor have been disillusioning and have raised other questions. The refrain that the political takes precedent over the personal is one that she reiterates. (Xanana is 'owned by the whole people', one Timorese woman said to me.) 'It is not to say we don't have things we both enjoy - art and poetry, watching movies, the same aspirations - but from 1999 the personal has been relegated to a time in the future. It is a bit unrealistic that we could have anything resembling a normal life,' Kirsty says with a weary smile. 'I think there is a part of Xanana that is very traditional and probably does expect that a woman is there to support him rather tahn have a world of her own.' Kirsty, with the help of a nanny, is the primary carer of their children. Xanana's long days and frequent trips to the countryside or abroad mean that he is ofen an absent father. It is usually only on a Sunday that they spend time together as a family, and since their wedding they have had only two brief holidays, in Bali and Fiji. Their marriage was a simple church wedding at a seminary in the hills behind Dili. Kirsty, then six months pregnant with Alexandre, wore a traditional Timorese dress, known as a tais, a piece of cloth wrapped around like a sarong. Attended by about 50 friends, including her mother and brother (her father died in 1988), the wedding was a low key affair to avoid any controversy in this strict Catholic country.

Pat Walsh, who knew Kirsty as a student in Sydney and now works in Dili for the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, sums it up: 'it is natural to portray Kirsty as Queen Guinevere in Camelot, Xanana is such an attractive, romantic figure with an extraordinary story. But it is no fairy tale. She has taken on an enormous role, and as a foreigner in an extremely proud society it was hard for her to become accepted. The Timorese would have liked someone who had fought, who they could identify with.' While I heard some criticism mainly from Timorese women (one said, 'How can she speak on behalf of Timorese women when she is a foreigner?), Kirsty is becoming accepted as 'mother of the nation', largely through her work, rather than her status as Xanana's wife.

Timor is not a safe place but, despite having been robbed and, on one occasion stabbed in the leg, Kirsty plays down any security risk. Now she has guards, which she resents along with the 'invasion of privacy', and her loss of anonymity - 'going shopping and meeting, greeting and smiling while you choose your lettuce'. Her voice trails off. She misses the intellectual stimulation and egalitarianism of Australia and finds the 'paternalistic culture here difficult to stomach'.

The president and first lady, who have put their own differences aside for that of 'their' country, recognise what a huge task lies ahead. Xanana is the only real hope of national unity. Without him, without even any common national language, this tiny half-island that clings precariously

to peace could disintegrate into tribal conflict. And while the myth formed by the people still hovers like a halo around him, Xanana says, 'They are forming an unreal image. Inside I am not myth. I am just a man.'

Ends