

Land rights: a gift for refugees in West Timor

by Ingvild Solvang

In the West Timorese village of Sukabitetek, a wedding ceremony with a difference has taken place. Local residents and refugees from East Timor have pledged their troth as one community in a ceremony sealed with gifts – and land rights.

The East Timorese who took refuge in Sukabitetek have been lucky. When they arrived five years ago, fleeing the violence in East Timor, the local population welcomed them and the oldest man in the village, Herman Besin, provided land for temporary homes and gardens. Although they are now Indonesian citizens, the 13 remaining refugee families struggle to make ends meet on land which is not their own. Land and water are scarce in poverty-ridden West Timor and the local population is often no better off than the former refugees.

After five years, however, Mr Besin – a man of simple lifestyle and modest means – astounded his neighbours by offering to formally transfer land rights to the refugees. “I see the refugees as a part of my own family now,” he explains. With help from the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Indonesia and a legal consultant, legal contracts are drawn up. The agreement is signed in the presence of government officials and Mr Besin uses the opportunity to ask the government to provide improved water supply and housing. “I hope that when the government sees that a poor man like me is able to help the refugees, they will realise that they should also do something,” Mr Besin says.

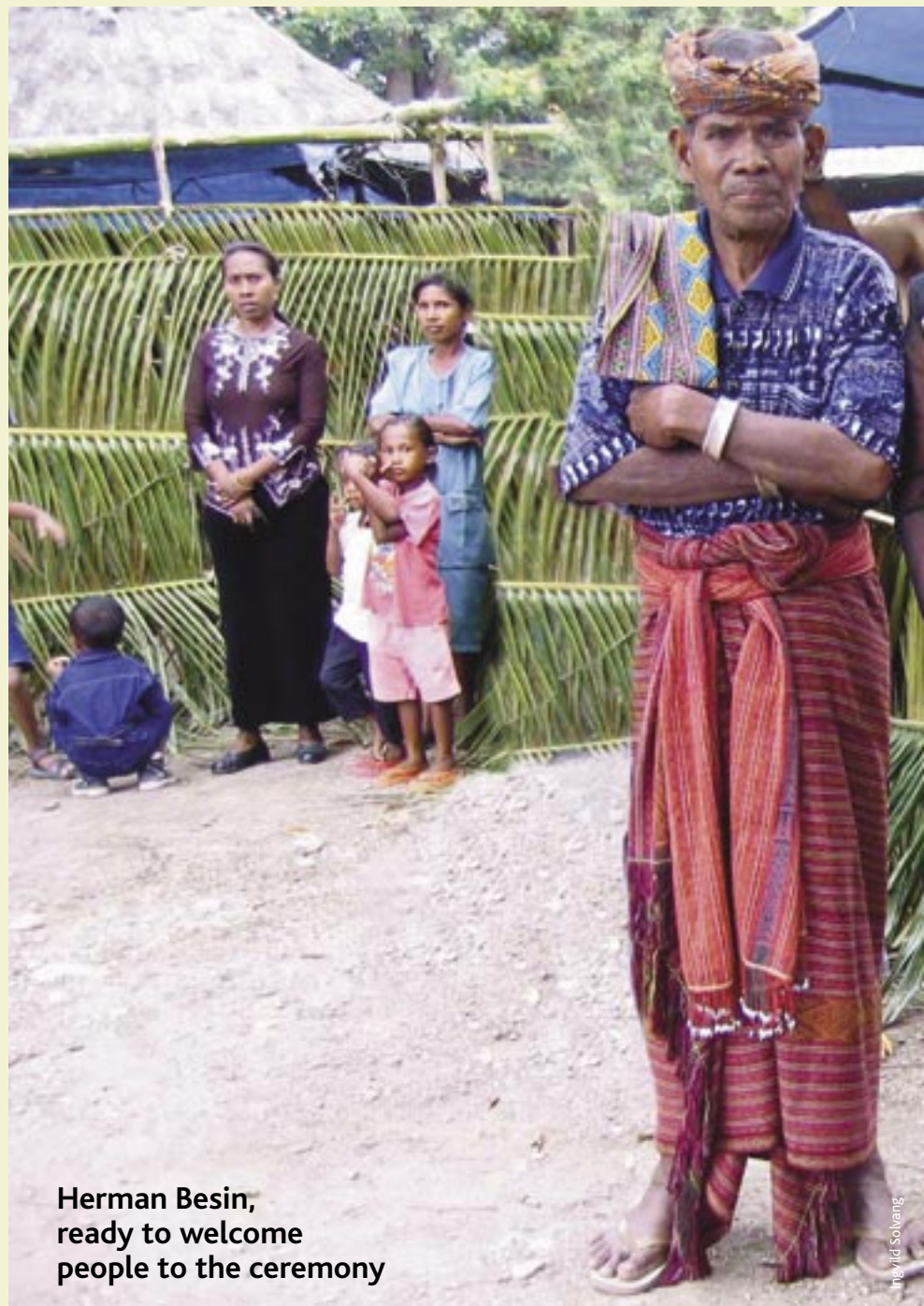
To cement the relationship the new families are welcomed with *Fetsawa Umamane*, a ceremony usually performed at weddings. Mr Besin and his family, as the givers of land, represent the bride’s family and offer five lengths of hand-woven traditional cloth – *tais* – to the refugees. The refugees – the groom’s family – respond with a gift of money. JRS contributes an ox for the feast and the refugee families provide rice, vegetables and spices. The whole community is involved – in singing, dancing, reciting poetry and preparing and sharing the feast. Legally the refugees gain rights to use the land and traditionally the old and new families of the community become one.

The process of finding an appropriate traditional approach can help tie refugee and local communities together, creating a forum where people share and learn about their cultural values. In the local community, local tradition is stronger than legal documents. For this reason, the *Fetsawa Umamane* ceremony provided an important supplement to the legal process. The combination of formal legal and

traditional approach will hopefully lay a solid foundation for long-lasting good relations between both old and new families in Sukabitetek.

Ingvild Solvang is the JRS Indonesia Advocacy Manager.
Email: solvang@jrs.or.id

For news and updates from JRS Indonesia, visit www.jrs.or.id



Herman Besin, ready to welcome people to the ceremony