

Life in the Foreign Service

Alum trades major embassies for the chance to make a real difference

Hans Klemm '79 has always been a "big-embassy guy." The 27-year Foreign Service veteran has worked in U.S. embassies in Korea, Japan, and Germany, among others. His current assignment as U.S. ambassador to Timor-Leste, in Southeast Asia, is a change of scenery, to say the least.

Known as East Timor before gaining independence from Indonesia in 2002, Timor-Leste has endured occupations and revolutions, and today still battles to sustain such necessities as basic infrastructures and a solid education system.

"When I got here, I saw a part of the Foreign Service I'd forgotten—dirty, dangerous, small, and isolated," Klemm says. "I wondered how it'd work for me."

His time in Timor-Leste has been productive, but not without the occasional difficulty for the 15-person embassy staff.

Klemm arrived in the country in August of 2007, just before decisions resulting from a parliamentary election angered many Timorese. Citizens of Dili, the country's capital, took to the streets destroying property, including 150 houses.

"There's a lot of pressure, personally as well as professionally," Klemm says.

"There are expectations to make sure your resources are used as effectively as possible and to ensure stability."

Klemm's preparation for his role in the State Department began unintentionally in 1975 as a freshman at Centre. He studied German at the College, and eventually became fluent in both German and Japanese. He transferred to Indiana University in 1976.

"I have very fond memories of my time at Centre," Klemm says. "I've kept in touch with a number of people over the past 25 years."

Born in Detroit, he moved to Louisville as a child. His father was transferred to Germany, where Klemm attended an

American high school with other students whose parents worked for the U.S. Embassy in Berlin. This was his first exposure to a possible career in the Foreign Service. Klemm says he wanted to return to Kentucky to attend college and chose Centre because it was one of the best schools in the state.

During his junior year at IU, Klemm went through the State Department testing process. He passed all of the necessary exams, and after graduating from IU in 1980 with a bachelor's degree in history and economics, Klemm joined the State Department. Later he earned a master's degree in international development policy from Stanford University.

The United States has a current presence in Timor-Leste for several reasons, although it has been a generous provider of aid to the country since the mid-1990s, Klemm says.

One reason is for humanitarian purposes. Timor-Leste is poor, with high illiteracy, infant and maternal mortality rates, and unemployment.

"Dili contains not a single bookstore, elevator, movie theater—all the amenities we're used to in the United States," Klemm says. "Ninety-eight percent of families use wood to cook every meal, so many people spend most of the time during the day fetching wood."

The United States is also promoting democracy in the country. Until Timor-Leste declared its independence in 2002, the country was under brutal occupation by Indonesia.

"Given the history of the country, they have very weak institutions—the justice system, policy, and military services are poorly run, and there needs to be reform of discipline and ethics," Klemm says. The constitution Timor-Leste currently has in place shares many of the same ideals of self-government as the U.S. Constitution:



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Hans Klemm '79 spent a day on campus in February talking to classes about life as the U.S. ambassador to Timor-Leste and meeting with students interested in the Foreign Service.

a system of checks and balances and guarantee of fundamental human rights, among other principles.

U.S. aid in the country also promotes social and economic development. Klemm says Timor-Leste is getting a lot of support from other countries, as well as the United Nations, which, along with Australia, has troops and police in the country to provide security and stability until institutions are strengthened enough for the country to sustain democracy on its own.

While serving as ambassador to Timor-Leste comes with sacrifices—such as a commuter marriage (his wife works in Japan)—and sometimes difficulties, Klemm is honored to have the chance to help a nation stabilize and grow.

"I'm proud to represent the president of the United States, the U.S. government, and the people as a whole," he says.

—Abby Malik
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