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## EAST TIMOR/ TIMOR-LESTE

The world's newest country continues its struggle for survival. East Timor (or Timor-Leste as it prefers to be called) suffered from international neglect for decades. Now it seems, after a brief flurry of international attention, it is returning to benign neglect.

The country, a former Portuguese colony, was invaded by Indonesia in 1975 (with the support, if not encouragement, of the US and Australia). The people fought back and eventually in 1999 East Timor made its final dash for freedom. There was turmoil in Indonesia because of the 1997 Asian economic crisis. The people voted in a referendum for independence. Indonesian-backed militias punished them and an outraged international community insisted that an international force (initially from Australia and then from the United Nations) be allowed to maintain order and set the colony on the road to independence.

The UN Mission of Support for East Timor (UNMISSET), which began in 2000, ended its role in May 2005. (The main UN official with responsibility for East Timor in the early days was Sergio Vieira De Mello, who was later assassinated at the UN office in Iraq).

The country's domestic problems are immense. It is the poorest country in south-east Asia and one of the poorest in the world. It has a population of just fewer than one million. More than 40 per cent live below the poverty line on less than US\$0.55 cents a day. 43 per cent of the children are underweight for their age and suffering malnutrition. 44 per cent of the predominantly rural population cannot meet their basic needs for food, clothing and housing. Only 20 per cent have access to safe water.

Life expectancy stands at 57 years. Maternal mortality is the worst in the world. Only 57 per cent of the population is literate. Half of the population is aged fewer than 16 but unemployment or underemployment is about 70 per cent. There is a significant urban drift by young people in search of work.

Meanwhile on top of all those problems, many of the basic issues we take for granted in developed countries have to be sorted out. For example, what should be the national language? Portuguese was the language spoken by the ruling elite in colonial days, while the local people spoke a variety of local languages. After 1975 Indonesian became the language of the ruling elite. Should the country revert to Portuguese or opt for English, the international language? The Government has gone for Portuguese.

The machinery of government is small and fragile. The government has a budget of less than US\$100 million. Dr Jose Ramos-Horta, the foreign minister, has said that “the most fragile sector of the administration in Timor-Leste is the judiciary. We have very few trained judges, prosecutors, lawyers. Most foreign business would not trust our judiciary. Small time offenders languish in jail without trial. And there are no short term solutions. We are committed to create a strong and independent judiciary but this is many years off.”

Looking overseas, one foreign problem comes from Indonesia. There has been a remarkable change since the 1998 overthrow of President Suharto. With over 230 million people, this is now the world’s third largest democracy (after India and the US) and the largest Islamic state.

But Timor-Leste shares a common land border with West Timor and there are constant fears that the militia will again attack. The militia also still hold captive some East Timorese kidnapped in 1999 and will not allow them to return home.

In August 2005, the UN released a report on the prosecution of serious crimes committed in East Timor in 1999. The UN Commission of Experts recommends further steps to ensure those who were responsible should be held to account. Indonesia has still not done enough to punish those responsible for the violence. The experts have recommended that if Indonesia does not do better within the next six months, then the UN Security Council should create an ad hoc criminal tribunal.

The US became more critical of Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor after the November 12 1991 Santa Cruz massacre of more than 270 civilians, by troops using US M-16 rifles. Congress then voted for the first time to restrict Indonesia from receiving International Military Education and Training (IMET). Congress has used the withdrawal of military assistance as a tool to change Indonesian policies in East Timor. On July 20 2005 the US Senate again voted to restrict military assistance as a way to encouraging the military’s greater respect for human rights.

Finally, there is the problem of Australia. During the Indonesian occupation of East Timor (1975-99), Australia (quite contrary to the UN Security Council) negotiated an agreement with Indonesia to divide up the oil and natural gas in the seabed south of East Timor. The reserves could eventually be worth as much as US\$15 billion. Now that Timor-Leste is independent Australia has had to negotiate a new treaty. But the Indonesians gave a very generous amount of territory (and potential wealth) to Australia and Timor-Leste has been unwilling to do so.

Australians have been annoyed by their Government’s greed in bullying Timor-Leste to accept, in July 2005, a deal which is still too harsh on Timor-Leste.



Ironically, a short-term financial gain may be a long-term loss for Australia. Australia does not want a failed state immediately to its north. It has an interest in Timor-Leste becoming a flourishing democracy built on a good economic base. A failed state may require another Australian military intervention – or risk another Indonesian one.

Ultimately, a major factor in determining the new country's future comes from the people. Visitors are impressed by the resilience of the people. They have suffered so much – their war against the Indonesian occupiers was, on a per capita basis, one of the biggest wars of the 20th century – and yet they have overcome horrific adversity. In much the same way as they eventually won through in the war, so foreign observers believe that they have the right character to eventually win the peace.

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