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Timor-Leste: Rebuilding Again?

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July 2006

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Faced with its worst crisis since gaining independence in 1999, the new nation of Timor-Leste is once again the subject of upcoming UN Security Council resolutions that call for the reintroduction of peacekeeping forces and international police. Timor's embattled prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, has left the government after the threatened resignation of the popular president, Xanana Gusmao. Australian-led troops are trying to stabilize the situation while the UN conducts an assessment in anticipation of deployment of a new peacekeeping force.

Seven years after the UN intervened to end Indonesia's rule over East Timor, fragile institutions of governance coupled with high unemployment have led to the near collapse of the state. What happened to this "poster child" intervention? Was the withdrawal of the UN premature? What can be done to stabilize the nation and return to the critical task of nation building?

As in so many post-war interventions, early departure of international assistance left embryonic institutions of government without the necessary experience to confront the complex tasks associated with building a nation. The departure was supported by Timor's new government, which sought to be truly independent. Now rapid attention is required in four key areas: national language policy; the disintegration of the security institutions; huge unemployment, particularly among youth; and the complicity of some government leaders in the recent violence that has claimed dozens of lives and displaced tens of thousands. These were the consensus recommendations that emerged from presentations at a public meeting hosted by the U.S. Institute of Peace on June 22, 2006.

Sukehiro Hasegawa, the longtime special representative of the secretary-general of the UN in Timor; **Constancio Pinto**, the representative of Timor-Leste to the United States; **Elizabeth Huybens**, the World Bank's representative in Timor from 2002-2006; and **Patricia Delaney**, social anthropologist and Fulbright scholar in Timor, discussed the dramatic turn of events.

A Rapidly Deteriorating Situation

Mr. Hasegawa, who joined the meeting by telephone from Timor-Leste's capital city of Dili, described a tense situation as the government prepared for the resignation of the prime minister and the imminent arrival of thousands of protestors



from the east and west. International security forces were positioned to quell anticipated violence, and the city remained largely emptied of its population.

This crisis followed a heightening tension within the armed forces that culminated with the dismissal of 600 soldiers last March. Subsequent clashes erupted between forces loyal to various political factions. Spreading violence claimed more than 30 lives, injured dozens, and left a large number of buildings burned and looted. According to Mr. Haseqawa, 72,000 people displaced by the violence are now sheltering in 66 makeshift camps in Dili. A further 79,000 are living with their families in the twelve districts outside Dili.



UN peacekeepers in East Timor

(Courtesy: [International Action Network on Small Arms](#))

Broken Security Institutions Once Again: The Plague of Post-War Peacebuilding Operations

The lack of attention to institution building in the security sector remains the root of the problem for East Timor. Panelists agreed that security forces suffered from a breakdown of command and control during the recent outbreak of violence and are on the verge of collapse. Huybens said that the army and police, at odds with each other since independence, increasingly are fighting openly. The speakers at the meeting indicated that government officials and political forces had manipulated the security forces during recent events, in part by providing arms to some of them.

Pinto acknowledged that the government had not foreseen the crisis, which was precipitated by the severance of the ex-combatants, and said that certain officials had exploited the situation. Participants agreed that UN peacekeeping forces and [international police](#) are necessary to stabilize the country while the security sector is given the attention it requires. They pointed out that the international police will need the power to arrest and detain, requiring changes in the laws of the now-sovereign East Timor.

A Fundamental Disconnect Between the People and the Government

The government of Timor-Leste and the people literally do not speak the same language. An early decision by the UN and East Timor's post-war leaders to promote Portuguese as the national language effectively cut off the population from their government and international officials. Portuguese is one of two official national languages. While Tetun is the other, Portuguese has been treated by many in government as the only language for use in government work. According to Delaney, while the vast majority of political elites speak Portuguese, only 10% of the population in 1999 used and understood Portuguese. Thus the people of Timor cannot read the laws promulgated by the legislature. Otherwise qualified Timorese cannot join the civil service. Government leaders venturing out beyond Dili to preside over district meetings are not understood.

The government needs to communicate openly with the average people in Timor, especially to set realistic expectations about the fruits of independence and democracy. The current crisis presents Timor's leaders and the international community with an opportunity to correct this fundamental mistake, lay the basis for a national dialogue on participation and governance, and involve a wider cross-section of Timor's population in the building of the state.

Massive Unemployment Fuels Timor's Short Fuse

Delaney reported that 14,000 young people are graduating every year with no hope of employment and that Timor is now the poorest country in Asia. Half of the population lives below the poverty line. Per capita income has dropped since the conflict ended in 1999, resulting in declining standards of living for most Timorese.

Yet Timor's leaders, faced with pervasive unemployment, decided not to borrow from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund out of fear of losing control over their economy. Some experts believe that this was a wise and courageous decision. Budget increases are one of the measures being adopted to deal with the current crisis but the public is skeptical that the funds will be used in an accountable manner. A large public works program needs to be embarked upon to employ significant numbers of Timorese, argued Mr. Hasegawa. Additional attention should also be paid to the development of rural areas of the country, where poverty and lack of food security are greatest.

Round Two for the UN and an Accountable and Transparent Timor Government

With the appointment of the new prime minister, Nobel laureate [Ramos Horta](#), Timor's government has the responsibility to deliver justice to the population and deal with those who perpetrated the violence.

An increased UN presence and assistance in the 2007 elections, reform of the security sector, institution building, increasing development of utilizing Timor's already existing local capacity, developing local government, and a new peacekeeping mission will help Timor regain the confidence of its population. Peace requires long-term nurturing of post-war societies.

Mr. Hasegawa urged that Timor-Leste be placed on the agenda of the new [U.N. Peacebuilding Commission](#), the organization recently established by the international community to deliver that longer-term support. It is up to the international community now to stay the course and for Timor's leaders and people to fulfill the potential of their new state.

Of Related Interest

- [Rebuilding East Timor...Again](#)
Current Issues Briefing with Sukehiro Hasegawa, June 22, 2006 (Audio)
- [Rule of Law Project: Constitution Making](#)
USIP's Rule of Law program is conducting a project on constitution making, peacebuilding, and national reconciliation. East Timor is one of the 18 countries in which a series of case study papers has been commissioned.
- [Reconstructing and Stabilizing War-Torn States: The Challenge Before Us](#)
March 2005 event featuring Sukehiro Hasegawa. (Summary, Audio & Video)
- [Responding to the Crisis in East Timor](#)
Current Issues Briefing with Ramos Horta, 1999 (Audio)
- [USIP-Assisted Peacemaking Projects of Nonprofit Organizations: East Timor](#)
Peaceworks, May 1998
- [East Timor Peace Agreements](#)
- [East Timor Truth Commissions](#)

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