

East Timor (Timor Leste)

BACKGROUND

Fragile Democracy

When an overwhelming majority of East Timorese voted for independence from Indonesia in 1999, it led to violent opposition. Australian-led peacekeeping troops were deployed and on 20 May 2002 East Timor was internationally recognised as an independent state.

Father Riley visited East Timor shortly after independence and committed to helping an orphanage located in the tiny town of Baguia, in an impoverished area deep in the mountains.

News from Baguia and the orphanage

The existing orphanage buildings have had some improvements completed, including painting the rooms and erecting more storage in the kitchen area. A security fence now surrounds the perimeter of the orphanage, and the courtyard area has been resurfaced. It was intended to upgrade the existing orphanage building with a second storey, but engineers reports have advised that the building would not sustain an extension of this type. It is great to advise that due to the generosity of a donor and Foundation, a new orphanage building is planned for Baguia, with the existing orphanage building being converted to a primary school. Community consultation and government/Church approval has led to suitable land being identified and plans outlined. The new building will house 50 children and take about one year to construct, using local builders.

The food program continues, with funding sent monthly to facilitate the purchase of more fruit, vegetables and meat for the children residing at the orphanage. This in turn stimulates the local economy as market growers increase their sales. The children's health outcomes are improved, with less illness and improved concentration at school.

Computer Centre

The Computer Centre, established by Youth Off The Streets Overseas Relief Fund, continues to thrive, and over 80 young people and adults attending regular classes. Some adult students walk many kilometres to attend classes, so the classes finish early enough for students to reach home during daylight. Donated laptops were sent over to Baguia to help start the program. One enterprising qualified local young man started an IT support business, to assist the computer centre and other businesses in larger towns in the region. He is already employing other young people and now has a very positive future. The small building that was converted to the computer centre was identified as requiring a long term, consistent and sustainable energy supply, as electricity in Baguia is only available for a few hours each night, and the fuel to operate the generators is expensive. A submission was made to the company Alternative Technology Association and was successful. A group of their employees volunteered to visit the computer centre building and erect solar panels on the roof, with the project being completed over a two day period. Training was provided to local young people so that the system could be serviced and maintained appropriately. We are very grateful to the charity group Friends of Baguia, whose local volunteer has supported the teachers and students since the centre commenced operations.

Country Facts

OFFICIAL COUNTRY NAME: Timor Leste (known as East Timor in English)

CAPITAL: Dili

LOCATION: Timor-Leste is located in Southeast Asia, in the East of the Indonesian archipelago and North-West of Australia. The nation comprises the eastern half of Timor Island, along with the enclave of Oecusse in Indonesian West Timor, the island of Ataúro directly facing Dili, and the islet of Jaco at the Eastern tip of the island

AREA: While Timor-Leste is comparably small at just 15,000 square kilometres, the island is extremely mountainous. The highest peak is Mount Ramelau at nearly 3000 metres with much of the rest of the country mountainous, though there are various extensive plateaus.

CLIMATE: Much of Timor-Leste experiences distinct wet and dry seasons, and the vegetation varies from tropical through to semi-arid.

POPULATION: The population of Timor-Leste is now just over one million people. While the largest concentration of the population is found in the capital of Dili, the majority of the population live either in regional centres or rural communities across the nation's 13 districts.

RELIGION: In regards to religion, the vast majority of the population are Catholic (over 90 per cent) with small populations of Muslims, Protestants and Hindus.

LANGUAGE: The official languages of Timor-Leste are Tetun and Portuguese while Indonesian and English are designated as working languages. However, much of the population does not speak either Tetun or Portuguese as a 'mother tongue', and there are more than 30 languages used across the territory with some of the larger language groups being Bunak, Kemak, Makasai and Mambai.

NATURAL RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: Much hope has been placed in the potential tax revenue derived from oil and gas in the Timor Sea. With long and acrimonious negotiations with Australia regarding a maritime treaty, and subsequently the access to the Timor Sea, many hope that revenue will soon begin to have an economic impact within Timor-Leste. The majority of the population remain subsistence farmers, with coffee one of the most important agricultural exports.

CURRENCY: Currency is based on the US dollar (though now with coinage unique to Timor-Leste).

CURRENT ISSUES: Contemporary Timor-Leste faces many challenges. Impoverishment, unemployment, poor and non-existent social services, low standards of living, literacy, general and maternity health, have all endured and are common experiences for a great many East Timorese. Continuous disapproval of the government from sections of the community, as well as allegations of corruption and mismanagement, unresolved tensions over land and property, have turned into different forms of social unrest. The most serious upheaval however has occurred in 2006, with the complete collapse of security in the capital and fighting between highly factionalised police and military forces. In the ensuing power vacuum, the emergence of gangs, based to a significant extent on an ethnic division between Lorosa'e (the East of Timor-Leste), and Loromonu (the West of Timor-Leste), has demonstrated in the most dramatic fashion the many difficulties that Timor-Leste faces as it continues the process of nation-building.

Source: The Globalism Institute - RMIT University