



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development  
Office of International Justice and Peace

**Background on Timor-Leste**  
**February 2008**

*In East Timor, the Catholic Church intends to continue making her contribution, notably in the fields of education, healthcare and national reconciliation. The political crisis experienced by this young State...highlights a certain fragility in the processes of democratization.*

--Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 8, 2007

**CURRENT SITUATION:** On February 11, 2008 gunmen wounded President Jose Ramos-Horta and attacked the home of Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao in what may have been an attempted coup. Thus security remains tenuous after renewed violence struck East Timor (now called Timor-Leste) in 2006 when rival Timorese security forces turned on each other. There were some improvements in 2007 with national elections setting the stage for much-needed development. But the situation remains fragile nearly six years since the island territory achieved its independence following 24 years of brutal occupation by Indonesia. During the occupation an estimated 100,00 to 250,000 people, out of the original population of less than 700,000, perished from the combined effects of the war and the destruction of the economic and physical infrastructure.

Major political developments in the past year were the Presidential and Parliamentary elections which were generally deemed free, fair and successful by election observers. Campaigning was peaceful, voter turnout was high (around 80% for each election) and the voting process went relatively smoothly. In the Presidential election in April-May 2007, 1996 Nobel Peace Prize Co-Laureate Jose Ramos-Horta decisively won. After the June 2007 Parliamentary elections, President Ramos-Horta asked a coalition of four parties to form a new government, which appointed outgoing President Xanana Gusmao, widely admired for his long leadership in the struggle for independence, as Prime Minister.

The Gusmao government has begun to establish itself, instituting a new structure and starting to act on its commitment to focus on development and poverty reduction over the next five years. This revised government structure puts both the police and the military directly under the Prime Minister's office, to avoid a repeat of the 2006 conflict. But the new democracy is hampered by an inexperienced civil administration, high unemployment (estimated as high as 50 percent overall) and lack of capacity to effectively use the discovery of oil and gas off-shore to jumpstart other areas of the economy. Timor-Leste remains one of the poorest countries in Asia.

Health is a crucial issue with most of the population highly vulnerable to respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases, in addition to malaria, dengue fever and tuberculosis. Child and maternal mortality rates are the highest in the region and the incidence of malaria has increased threefold since 1999. But there has been some progress with more local clinics opened, enabling doctors and nurses to reach poor households more successfully. Over 80 percent of the population now has some access to health care so the foundation has been laid for improvements in health conditions.

While security across the country had appeared to improve in 2007, the February 2008 attacks on the President and Prime Minister by those dissatisfied with the outcome of the 2006 conflicts and subsequent elections points to the likelihood of sporadic violence and armed conflict in 2008-2009. Worried over their safety during the crisis in 2006, an estimated 100,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) reside in tent cities, several of which are maintained by the local Church. Though resettlement is a stated top priority of the new government, little progress has been made on resolving the IDP situation. While some IDPs have returned to their homes in the past year, tens of thousands are likely to remain in camps around Dili through much of 2008.

The UN Mission (UNMIT) is expected to be extended as President Ramos-Horta has asked the UN to stay in the country for five more years after its mandate expires on 26 February 2008, and the UN Security Council delegation, which visited Timor-Leste in November 2007, has also recommended an extension. The current UN mission should be fully supported, stressing institution-building and social and economic development, consolidating stability and enhancing a culture of democratic governance.

**THE CHURCH IN TIMOR-LESTE:** Timor-Leste's Catholic bishops continue to emphasize that poverty and associated deprivations, including high urban unemployment, especially among young people, are issues that must be addressed with urgency. As both of Timor-Leste's Catholic bishops have emphasized, there are no quick solutions possible after decades of warfare and widespread suffering. The bishops have stressed that special mechanisms, both economic and social, must be put in place to ameliorate the situation in the years ahead, and the support of the United States for these mechanisms, including public works employment to repair the destruction, is vital. In addition to increased, direct U.S. assistance, the bishops in Timor-Leste firmly believe the U.S. should support a UN peacekeeping mission, which will be needed for the foreseeable future, and a well-focused UN presence.

**USCCB POSITION:** For many years, USCCB questioned the support of successive U.S. Administrations for Indonesia's oppressive occupation of Timor-Leste, and called for respect for human rights there. Since the Indonesian occupation ended in 1999, USCCB has been supportive of reconciliation efforts and sustainable development in the country and has also advocated for adequate U.S. government assistance to Timor-Leste.

**ACTION REQUESTED:**

To help consolidate democratic governance in Timor-Leste, it is important that the U.S. maintain and expand its relatively modest financial contributions to Timor-Leste's development. At present there is the threat of deep cuts in the Administration's aid budget for Timor-Leste -- which could have a severe impact on health programs supported by USAID -- in addition to possible cuts in critical programs related to democracy, governance and economic growth. These reductions could have grave consequences, especially at this critical time. Communications with Congress should also stress that programs in Timor-Leste must address poverty and unemployment, and that the long-term presence of international peacekeeping forces is of vital importance.

Please ask your Senators and Representative to **support a U.S. aid budget for Timor-Leste at the \$35 million level for the next year** -- which would enable a significant expansion of vital health efforts and employment programs. **The U.S. should also support continuing UN efforts in Timor-Leste, including peacekeeping.**

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:** visit [www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/easttimor.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/easttimor.shtml) or contact Virginia Farris, 202-541-3182 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); [vfarris@usccb.org](mailto:vfarris@usccb.org).

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