

# Timor-Leste

## GEOGRAPHY

Timor-Leste (East Timor) lies northwest of Australia and forms the eastern half of the island of Timor, an island of Indonesia. Rugged mountains run the length of the island. The southern coastal plain consists of swamps and river deltas. The rocky soil and low rainfall make farming difficult, often leading to food and water shortages in the dry season.

Regular droughts and heavy seasonal rains have resulted in erosion, soil loss and diminished water quality, which in turn threaten coral reefs and fisheries. Widespread use of slash-and-burn agriculture has led to deforestation and soil erosion.

## PEOPLE

There are regionally distinct groups made up of people of Malayo-Polynesian and Papuan background and also a small Chinese minority. More than 90 percent of the population is Catholic and a small minority are Muslim. Many people also hold beliefs connecting them to the spirits of the dead, through stones, animals, wells or streams. Tetum and Portuguese are the official languages while Indonesian and English are the more common working languages.

## HISTORY

The Portuguese started to trade with Timor in the 16th century and colonised it thereafter. In 1859, Portugal ceded the western part of the island to the Dutch. On 28 November 1975, East Timor declared independence from Portugal and nine days later was invaded and occupied



Map courtesy of The General Libraries  
The University of Texas at Austin.

by Indonesian forces. Over the next 25 years, the East Timorese people opposed the occupation and up to 250,000 East Timorese were killed.

In August 1999, an overwhelming majority of the people voted for independence from Indonesia in a UN-supervised referendum. However, between the referendum and the arrival of an Australian-led multinational peacekeeping force in late September 1999, militias loyal to Indonesia (organised and supported by the Indonesian military) went on the rampage, killing thousands of East Timorese and pushing 300,000 into West Timor as refugees. The majority of the country's infrastructure was destroyed.

In May 2002, Timor-Leste was internationally recognised as an independent state. In 2006, internal conflict erupted, resulting in a breakdown of law and order. An Australian-led International Stabilisation Force was deployed to quell the violence and this was followed by the establishment of the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste. These interventions allowed for presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in 2007, with Jose Ramos Horta elected President and Xanana Gusmao elected Prime Minister. In February 2008, a rebel attack on the government was thwarted and since then Timor-Leste has enjoyed a period of relative stability.

## ECONOMY

International aid has been helping the people to rebuild and create a new economy. However, an extensive drought in 2003 and a gradual reduction in international presence have held back GDP growth. Timor-Leste is the poorest country in Asia, and the poorest country outside Africa.



World Vision is working with communities to provide better quality and access to education.

Most people are subsistence farmers, and in some areas bartering is common. Industrialisation is only beginning to develop, so most manufactured items have to be imported, making the cost of living high.

Major industries include coffee, rice, maize, logging, fisheries, spices, coconuts and cacao. Tourism has the potential to develop but is held back by the lack of hotels, transport and other facilities. Timor-Leste's main trading partners are Indonesia, Australia and Portugal. In 2005, Australia and Timor-Leste agreed to share revenues from offshore gas and oil fields in the Timor Sea. This is a major source of revenue but will do little to create jobs for the unemployed.

## LIVING CONDITIONS

The majority of the population live in small villages and grow their own food. Dili, the capital, and Baucau are the two major towns. Both are struggling with the issues of unemployment and rebuilding after the destruction which accompanied the vote for independence. While initially there was great hope as the new country emerged as a new democracy, recently there have been outbursts of violence caused by frustration at the slow process of development and the chronic levels of poverty and unemployment experienced by young people.

Villagers live in a variety of traditional housing made from bush materials. Food consists of what can be grown in gardens – rice and corn are the main staples, while chicken, sheep and pigs provide protein. People living near the sea also eat fish. Malnutrition is a significant issue for nearly half the children in Timor-Leste.

## EDUCATION

Despite a 2004 census showing that nearly 30,000 primary school-age children were not in school, enrolment rates



Improving child and maternal health is a priority for World Vision's work in Timor-Leste.

## Comparatively speaking...

| CATEGORY   | TIMOR-LESTE  | AUSTRALIA    |
|--|--------------|--------------|
| Population   | 1.2 million  | 21.5 million |
| Urban population (as % of total)                     | 28.1%        | 89.1 %       |
| GNI per capita (\$US ppp)                            | \$5,303      | \$38,692     |
| Population with access to an improved water source   | 69%          | 100%         |
| Adult literacy rate                                  | 50.1% (2008) | 99%          |
| Population living below US\$1.25 (PPP) a day         | 37.2%        | 0%           |
| Under-5 mortality rate (deaths per 1000 live births) | 93           | 6            |
| Life expectancy at birth                             | 62.1 years   | 81.9 years   |

Source: Human Development Report 2010  
United Nations Development Programme

are increasing. There are also significant numbers of older students, including adults, who are now attending schools. The balance of girls and boys in primary schools is nearly even, but at secondary and tertiary level, girls' participation declines steeply. The official language has been changed from Indonesian to Portuguese and the Brazilian model of education has been modified. Many schools are still in poor condition and lack resources.

The East Timorese have hope for the future and want to build their nation into a strong, independent, democratic society, despite the recent setbacks and violence. The country faces challenges in developing a process for reconciliation arising from past violence, and dealing with issues such as widespread youth unemployment. Other challenges include drought and developing sustainable political, economic and social systems for future progress.

## WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN TIMOR-LESTE

- provides rehabilitation support for families affected by the violence in and around the capital Dili in mid-2006;
- helps farmers to develop improved farming and livestock raising techniques;
- supports mobile health clinics servicing remote villages;
- trains midwives and traditional birth attendants to improve maternal health and reduce child mortality;
- helps remote communities develop small-scale enterprises and improve agricultural outputs;
- facilitates training courses in fields such as carpentry and electrical repairs for young people who have dropped out of school;
- conducts water, health and sanitation projects in target communities.

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