

Country profile: Timor-Leste

Geography

Timor-Leste (East Timor) lies northwest of Australia and forms the eastern half of the island of Timor. Rugged mountains run the length of the island. The southern coastal plain consists of swamps and river deltas. Timor-Leste has a tropical climate with wet and dry seasons.

The rocky soil and periods of low rainfall make farming difficult, often leading to food and water shortages in the dry season. Heavy rains in the wet season 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 also 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 96 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 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. In 2012, the United Nations was able to end its peacekeeping mission and withdraw from Timor-Leste.



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

Economy

Timor-Leste's economic challenges include addressing widespread poverty, high youth unemployment, and rebuilding infrastructure destroyed during times of conflict.

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. Over two-thirds of Timorese people live on less than two dollars (\$US) a day.

Development assistance has been helping the people of Timor-Leste to rebuild the country's infrastructure. The revenue from offshore oil and gas reserves has provided national income and driven economic growth, but done little to create jobs for the unemployed.

Major agricultural products include coffee, rice, corn, vanilla, logging, and fisheries. Tourism has the potential to develop further with more facilities. Industries include handicrafts, soap manufacturing, and printing.

Living Conditions

The majority of the population live in small villages and grow their own food. Villagers live in a variety of traditional housing made from bush materials. Dili, the capital, and Baucau are the two major towns.

For many people, food consists of what can be grown in gardens and small farms – rice and corn are the main staples, while chicken, sheep and pigs provide protein. People living near the sea also eat fish. Some people experience a 'hungry season' when crops are planted and growing, but before they are harvested. During this time their stores of the previous year's crop begin to run out, and they are unable to access or afford to buy more food, resulting in an extended period of hunger. Malnutrition is a major issue in Timor-Leste. 58.1 percent of children under the age of five are assessed as having moderate or severe stunted growth – an indicator of chronic malnutrition. This is one of the highest rates in the world.

While Timor-Leste has made significant improvements in healthcare, the maternal mortality ratio (deaths per 100,000 live births) is still one of the highest in Asia. Access to improved sanitation facilities is also low, particularly in rural areas. Other health issues include tuberculosis, malaria, and diarrhoea.

Education

School enrolment rates are increasing, and there are also significant numbers of older students, including adults, who are now attending schools. Timor-Leste is continuing to rebuild schools, and its workforce of qualified teachers, in order to improve the quality of education and to meet the needs of a growing population.

World Vision Australia in Timor-Leste

- Helps farmers to develop improved farming and livestock raising techniques
- Supports mobile health clinics servicing remote villages and trains midwives and traditional birth attendants to improve maternal health and reduce child mortality
- Helps remote communities develop small-scale income-generating enterprises and improve agricultural outputs
- Delivers water and sanitation projects

Indicator	Timor-Leste	Australia
Population (millions)	1.1 million	23.3 million
Urban population (% of total)	29.1%	89.5%
Gross National Income per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$9,674	\$41,524
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	No data	No data
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	58.3%	No data
Internet users (% of population)	0.9%	82.3%
Population using improved water source (% of total) ²	69.1%	100%
Doctors per 10,000 people	1.0	38.5
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	57	5
Life expectancy at birth	67.5 years	82.5 years
Human Development Index rank (out of 187)	128 th	2 nd

Sources: UNDP Human Development Report 2014; ² UNICEF www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ [accessed March 2015]; CIA The World Factbook www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tt.html [accessed March 2015]; DFAT Overview of Australia's aid program to Timor-Leste dfat.gov.au/geo/timor-leste/development-assistance/pages/development-assistance-in-timor-leste.aspx [accessed March 2015]; WHO Country health profile www.who.int/gho/countries/tls.pdf?ua=1 [accessed March 2015]