

Country profile

East Timor

GEOGRAPHY

East Timor lies northwest of Australia and forms the eastern half of the island of Timor, an island of Indonesia. It is also known as Timor Leste or Timor Lorosae. 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. 92% of the population are Catholics and 1.7% are Muslims. 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 early 16th century and colonised it mid-century. 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, East Timor was internationally recognised as an independent state.

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



ECONOMY

After the independence poll in 1999, most of East Timor's economic infrastructure was destroyed. International aid has been helping East Timor rebuild and create a new economy. However, an extensive drought in 2003 and a gradual reduction in international presence have held back GDP growth. East Timor is the poorest country in Asia, and the poorest country outside Africa.

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 revolve around 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. East Timor's main trading partners are Indonesia, Australia and Portugal. In 2005, Australia and East Timor 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 directly 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 with new democracy, recently there has been outbursts of violence caused by frustration at the slow progress 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.

EDUCATION

The 2004 census showed that nearly 30,000 primary school-age children were not in school. Despite which, enrolment has improved from 51% in 1999 to 75%. 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 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.

East Timor is extremely hopeful of building itself 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 massive youth unemployment. Other challenges include drought and developing sustainable political, economic and social systems for future progress.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN EAST TIMOR

- rehabilitation and support for families affected by the violence in and around Dili in mid-2006
- farmers are learning to develop improved farming and livestock techniques
- mobile clinics visit remote villages and provide medical support
- midwives and traditional birth attendants are being trained to improve maternal health and reduce child mortality
- 40 communities are learning to develop small-scale enterprises and to improve their agricultural output
- training courses such as carpentry and repairing electrical goods are provided for young people who have dropped out of school
- irrigation and sanitation systems are built

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	EAST TIMOR	AUSTRALIA
Population	0.8 million	19.7 million
Urban population (as % of total)	7.7%	91.9 %
GDP per capita (US\$)	\$389	\$26, 275
Population under age 15	42.5%	20.3%
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	52%	100%
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	male - 65% female -52 %	male - 99.0% female - 99.0%
Net primary enrolment ratio	75%	97%
Life expectancy at birth	55 years	79 years
Under-five mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	124	6
One-year-olds fully immunised against measles (%)	60%	93%
Children underweight for age (% under 5)	43%	0%
Tuberculosis cases (per 100,000 people)	753	6

United Nations Development Programme. 2005, *Human Development Report 2005: International Cooperation at a Crossroads*. Timor Leste, Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports, 2004



East Timorese children enjoying clean water. The tap was installed as part of a World Vision water project.

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