



Timor-Leste Update May 2020



What a year 2020 has become for us all! Fires, floods and now the coronavirus. I am sure we can come out of this as a stronger and more resilient society – at least I hope so!

Timor Leste of course has faced similar problems, floods, a severe outbreak of dengue fever and now the corona virus, but in a country like that – with the majority of the population living well below the poverty line, low health levels, poor hygiene, crowded housing and contaminated water supplies the effects of the coronavirus could be disastrous. So far they have been lucky.

Covid 19 in Timor Leste.

The Timorese government was very quick in putting in place a State of Emergency, closing national borders, creating the Integrated Crisis Management Centre, pursuing quarantine for returned travellers and contact tracing in compliance with World Health Organisation recommendations. These measures have been successful in containing the spread of the coronavirus with only 24 people testing positive. All these cases have come from returned travellers and there have been no recorded cases of community transmission nor reported deaths associated with the outbreak.

Several people in the sub-districts with respiratory symptoms are being monitored by Health Officials. The Australian government has donated 2,500 testing kits via the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin with the Ministry of Health set to broaden its testing regime beyond Dili and to all people with symptoms.

District Grant via Eastwood/Gladesville Rotary Club, I recently obtained a grant for GREENTL to organise the making of 2000 face masks and run an education campaign re covid 19. The project has been successfully completed. I was pleased to see GREENTL take the initiative and make some smart changes as the situation changed in Oecusse. The original tailor who was to make the masks ended up in quarantine as he travelled over the border, another sewing group was enlisted, a Youth Group from Oesono.



The worst problem at the moment is the lack of food as the borders are closed and the limited supply of food which is coming in is being sold at highly inflated prices in the larger shops. Very few people have work as all government projects have stopped, promised welfare payments have not materialised and fresh food markets have been closed. Luis tells me;

“covid 19 might not kill us but starvation will.”

GREENTL, with Police permission due to the lockdown, has been delivering food packages along with the masks to outlying villages. GREENTL liased with other NGOs such as Oxfam and Red Cross and the Covid19 Response Team so as to ensure that services were not duplicated. This meant some of the funding could be diverted to food packages. GREENTL also enlisted the help of some willing local business people who have supplied food, mainly rice and supermie at a reasonable

price.





The villagers are very thankful for this assistance.

From an article written by **João Almeida**, Acting Director Fundasaun Mahein, well worth reading (Website: www.fundasaunmahein.org)

“Timor Leste is by no means the only nation struggling to balance economic activity with public health. However, with discussions of how to handle the virus dominated by developed nations, Timor Leste has had, in many ways, to chart its own path, one where the stakes are monumentally higher. With our fragile health system and a population that already suffers from staggering rates of tuberculosis, malnutrition, other

coronavirus risk factors, and a recent dengue outbreak, a communal spread of the coronavirus could rip like wildfire through our country. At the same time, for the people of Timor Leste, starvation is neither an impossibility nor even a distant memory. These two outcomes are not contrasting choices, but two sides of the same coin: a poor and malnourished population faces increased susceptibility to the virus, even as desperate people are the ones most likely to break lockdown and quarantine—it is no coincidence that the most serious clashes between police and the public during the State of Emergency have been over economic activity, such as the destruction of vegetable sellers’ stalls at Tasi Tolu and protests by taxi and mikrolet drivers. For too many in Timor Leste, there is no choice between safe and unsafe, healthy and unhealthy, or surviving and dying. Poverty spreads the virus, and the virus spreads poverty. Any attempt to prevent one must address the other.”



Street markets such as this have been forcibly closed.

In a country like Australia of course we have problems but they do not compare with those faced by citizens in the poorer, developing countries of the world.

Politics in Timor Leste.

There is concern that political infighting, which was put aside at the beginning of this pandemic, will begin again now that the situation has eased slightly. The government’s response, whilst effective has also been disjointed, instances of police brutality have been ignored and some quarantine restrictions have been lackadaisical. It is important that these and other lockdown issues are addressed if Timor Leste is to be confronted by a second outbreak. The people of Timor Leste deserve better options than starvation or disease – the political infighting currently occurring does not improve the situation.

A quote from a friend in Oecusse - “East Timor’s politics are like waves going up and down. Today talk A, tomorrow talk B. Everything is just promises but nothing ever works.”

Understanding politics in Timor Leste is difficult to say the least, (that is not exclusive to Timor Leste).

Can you help the people of Oecusse?

GREENTL has been distributing food packages to isolated villages.

A 25 kg bag of rice costs \$22 and a box of supermie (40 packets) \$11. Rice and supermie are essential in that they are filling, easily transported and stored. Adding a few fresh vegetables if available makes a relatively nutritious meal – at least better than nothing!

How many food packages can you provide?

Donations over \$2 to the Sustainable Villages project are tax deductible:

Donate online by going to the Rotary Australia World Community Service, (RAWCS) website.

<https://donations.rawcs.com.au/Default.aspx?ProjectID=592&ReturnTo=4> If this connection does not work simply hit the donate now button and search for project number 50 years 11/12. (Sustainable Villages Oecusse).

Or via OzGREEN: https://ozgreen.nationbuilder.com/east_timor_donation