

East Timor: Poor, young nation needs reconciliation

The attempted assassination Feb. 11 of Jose Ramos-Horta, president of East Timor (Timor-Leste), points to the fragility of the young state and its susceptibility to the wiles of a small cadre. Shot twice and critically wounded, Ramos-Horta is recuperating in Australia. He is expected to make a full recovery.

Apparently leading the assassins was a disgruntled former soldier, Major Alfredo Reinado, who was killed by Ramos-Horta's bodyguards. The violence shocked the nation and marked a major setback in its social and economic progress.

The Southeast Asian country of one million has limited natural resources, but it is rich in its range of political views. Fourteen political parties vied for the unicameral legislature's 65 seats in elections last June. Following indecisive results, Ramos-Horta appointed Xanana Gusmao, a popular resistance leader, to the powerful post of prime minister to form a coalition government.

Six years after independence, East Timor finds itself caught between high-tech Australia and low-wage Indonesia. Durable goods and some of its food are imported. Coffee exports are subject to volatile prices on the world market. The downside of globalization is further illustrated by the fact that frozen chickens imported from Australia – and even Brazil – are cheaper than locally raised fowl.

Much of the populace faces food insecurity. The annual corn harvest lasts about nine months, supplemented with legumes and vegetables. Only a limited amount of fish and meat is consumed (meat animals are saved for special occasions such as weddings or funerals). Malnutrition and stunting is evident in the countryside.

East Timor's highly prized sandalwood was almost entirely removed during three centuries of Portuguese rule. The country is currently extracting oil and natural gas from reserves beneath the sea, but these could run out in as little as 30 years. Meanwhile, advocates say they hope East Timor will not fall victim to the so-called "resource curse," in which a country exhausts one valuable resource while failing to develop other critical sectors of the economy. East Timor earns 90 percent of its revenue from oil and gas. It has set up a petroleum fund, heavily invested in U.S. Treasury bonds, and spends the interest. However, the national budget has grown from \$99 million to \$300 annually.

East Timor was devastated following a UN-supervised referendum in 1999 in which the East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia. In subsequent fighting with Indonesian troops and pro-Indonesia militias, three-quarters of all structures were burned. Reconstruction was undertaken immediately. By the time independence was proclaimed three years later, the government was able to provide 80 percent of its schools with desks and chairs. More recently, former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri fired 600 military personnel in 2006 after the soldiers complained of alleged discrimination. Most of them hailed from the west of the country, while their officers were largely from the east.

Reinado and his men – perhaps 20 or 30 in all – abandoned their posts, taking their arms with them. Reinado, who was from the west, was popular with the mass media and with the country's youth. However, he never offered a program of governance. His motivation in the assassination attempt also seems unclear, but the violence will surely not benefit the country's mostly rural populace. Many earn less than \$1 per day, and 67 percent live below the poverty line.

Today the National Development Plan identifies governance, poverty reduction and improved food security as development priorities. It also aspires to an annual GDP growth rate of five percent in the medium term and a 50 percent reduction in the number of people living below the poverty line by 2015.

After centuries of oppression, the need for reconciliation in East Timor remains painfully clear. Traditional ceremonies have reconciled many with their communities since the terrible violence that led up to independence. Criminal charges are pending against others charged with more serious crimes. Ultimately, however, accountability and forgiveness must work hand in hand. As Dom Basilio do Nascimento, bishop of Baucau, said in 2002, “You can’t live forever with a broken heart. There has to be forgiveness, otherwise life cannot go on.”

For more information on East Timor, visit the website of the [East Timor Action Network](http://www.etan.org), www.etan.org.

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