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*Global Health Security:  
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

## **Timor Leste: Coping Well, Except on Unity**

*By Loro Horta*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Despite its many challenges Timor Leste has managed the COVID-19 pandemic reasonably well. Significant investments in health and education have created a fairly competent health service and a small, but dedicated pool of technocrats and scientists. The investment in human capital has been worthwhile.*

### **COMMENTARY**

ON 21 MARCH 2020 Timor Leste reported its first case of COVID-19, a Dutch national arriving from Europe. Many expected the small Southeast Asian state to face a severe crisis and necessitate urgent international assistance. However, the young nation dealt with the crisis in a diligent manner far better than some Western nations who love lecturing it on good governance.

While several Western nations close their borders only after having reported thousands of cases, the authorities in Dili closed Timor Leste's borders a week before the first case was ever reported, allowing only nationals and foreign residents to enter. On 8 April the country imposed a total lockdown and declared a state of emergency. As of 27 April Timor Leste reported 24 confirmed cases and not a single fatality. Hospitals handled the situation quite well while the police, the military and the civil protection services kept law and order and the populace calm.

### **Rapid Growth of Health Service**

When Timor Leste gained its independence in May 2002 the country merely had 27 medical doctors and a few dozen nurses. Its entire medical facilities including hospitals had been destroyed by the retreating Indonesian army and militias. Timor Leste's first government under Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri made health and education top priorities. A national goal supported also by the country's founding president Xanana Gusmao, this unity allowed for coherent strategies to be developed.

Starting in 2003 Timor Leste began to send hundreds of students for medical studies abroad, primarily to Cuba, which has a strong reputation in healthcare, but also to Australia, China, New Zealand and the Philippines. In 2011, with Cuban assistance, the country's medical school was created. By early 2019 Timor Leste had more than 1100 medical doctors – a ratio of one doctor per 1500 inhabitants. This is a ratio second only to Singapore in Southeast Asia.

Despite American and, to a lesser extent, Australian pressure for Dili not to send its students to Cuba, Timor Leste remained firm in its decision. Hundreds of Cuban doctors have served in Timor Leste since 2003, giving a priceless contribution to the country's health service.

While Timor Leste has on many occasions squandered hundreds of millions from its oil revenue in dubious projects, the massive spending on thousands of young Timorese abroad for higher education is paying off. Over 10,000 Timorese have graduated from universities around the world in several fields from Havana University to Harvard.

This is a significant achievement for a nation of 1.2 million. This has allowed a pool of competent and young technocrats and administrators to emerge. Many like former prime minister and minister of health Dr Rui Maria de Araujo and Dr Sergio Lobo, have been at the forefront in responding to the pandemic.

### **Hard Times Ahead**

While the young country has done a reasonable job at dealing with the pandemic, the crisis has also exposed many weaknesses. Timor Leste remains highly dependent on oil revenues. While statistics are contradictory, the most conservative put the country's dependence on oil at 75 percent of its GDP.

The resulting collapse in oil prices following the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis has reduced the country's revenue by more than 60 percent. Several Timorese leaders have paid lip service to the need to diversify the economy and very little has been done.

The agricultural sector has been badly neglected and food imports have increased every year while the tourism sector remains small. For the past three years the country has faced a political crisis that has seen early elections and constant changes of government. At a time when the country needs unity to face the uncertain future, its leaders are disunited.

Following independence Timor Leste leaders wisely invested in the healthcare and education sectors. This was a national decision supported by all the country's leaders.

This unity allowed the country to achieve some respectful results creating the basis for a successful response to the pandemic.

Unity allowed the country to gain its independence, successfully negotiate its maritime borders with a sometimes bullying Australia and avoid state collapse. Unfortunately, in the past three years the country has witnessed a serious political crisis.

With early elections, constant changes of government and abuse, the lack of unity among the various political parties remains. The achievements of the past 18 years will be very rapidly eroded. It is much easier and faster to destroy than to build.

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