

# Exploring issues in Timor-Leste Part 2

Portsalon journalist Rosie Nic Cionnaith recently travelled to Timor-Leste with the Simon Cumbers Media Fund. In the second of two articles she draws comparisons between this new country and Ireland.



Children playing in the refugee camp.



but there's also still tensions, and really high unemployment." Things may be beginning to improve, but there is still widespread poverty here. A newly-liberated nation may

have high hopes, but rising from the ashes is a slow business. Timor-Leste is ranked 134th of 187 countries on the UNDP Human Development Index. In plain English, this means that there are

few roads in the country, and those that do exist often have chunks washed away in the rainy season. It means that a significant percentage of the population live on a couple of dollars per day. It means that the capital's clinic is full of patients presenting with a disease nigh-eradicated in western society – tuberculosis, as well as high rates of malaria, dengue fever and HIV. It means that rural communities live with no, or limited, access to electricity, or basic sanitation, and that shanty towns are rife throughout the city.

And that's without taking into account that almost every living citizen is carrying the scars and memories of violent conflict.

I accept an invitation to visit the infamous Doctor Dan, an Irish-American running a free clinic in the Balro Pita district of Dili, on his Sunday rounds. Among the saddest of cases is a young mountain woman with special needs, who has just given birth. She has been ostracised by her community and is now entirely dependent on the team

here. Her one request as Dan shows us into her room is whether one of us can buy her a bucket to bathe her baby in.

On my last day, Meabh Cryan takes me to visit a refugee camp a few streets away from where I have been staying. After the extreme violence of 1999, the year that Timor-Leste won its right to independence, almost 200 displaced families sought refuge in the former Indonesian riot police headquarters. In January 2011 they were forcibly evicted in the middle of the night by their own government. Apparently, the land was now designated state property. So they have resettled here in Altarak Laran – a new home of makeshift shelters. But the government has other plans for this site too.

We have come in an unmarked jeep, as aid agencies have been banned from helping the 'illegal' community. Meabh and her companions have brought a consignment of tarpaulins, which are quickly distributed. As I wander around the main camp, an open-sided warehouse-type structure filled with tents

and sleeping bags, a group of children break into an energetic song and dance routine. In the midst of such bleakness, while parents worry for their future, the resilience of children is remarkable.

Before a country attains independence, there is a dream of freedom. But how fast and how effectively can this dream be fulfilled? Charles Schelner of local NGO La'o Hamutuk, an organisation that acts as watchdog for development in Timor, explains: "Just about every country in the world that has been through centuries of foreign rule and a generation or so of war takes another one or two generations before things settle down, before there is a sense of national unity, and people accepting whatever government is elected."

Just over a decade into their new democracy, people are already complaining of corruption, nepotism and elitism. Communities feel they are not being listened to. According to Charles' colleague Juvinal, "you can see corruption in the future; development, I'm not

sure. If you want to be a good leader, you should serve the people, not just people in the middle class, they need to build a people economy – especially for people in the rural area, so they can see the value of independence in their life. Because most of them, they sacrifice their life for independence."

"When a country becomes independent", explains Charles, "the leaders are those who were leaders of the resistance, and they were very good at that. It's how they got to be leaders. It's a different set of skills to govern a democratic country in peace-time. When you're in the resistance you look for quick solutions, and you expect everybody under you to follow orders. The Indonesian military will kill you if you don't make very quick decisions. So that's what the Prime Minister [Xanana Gusmão] is good at."

And of course, there is the overwhelming international presence here, with NGOs and consultants from all over the world, an emerging business arena, and new alliances being formed.

"It's a complex influencing mechanism" says Demetrio do Carvalho, ex-resistance fighter and founder of Timor-Leste's most prominent environmental NGO, the Haburas Foundation.

"Since 2002 up to today, we are a little bit, I think not using much Timorese brain, too much depending on consultants. Nation-building needs to have visions, and we need people to interpret that vision into strategy. This is where we need more space for Timorese people. We need to revitalise our identity."

"We can see that our struggle now is more difficult than before. Before our enemy was clear – the Indonesian military. Nowadays business group is our enemy. We need friends, solidary, but sometimes different interests can develop a different relationship, and drive the process. State building is a new good war, but this is a new struggle."

This article was supported by the Simon Cumbers Media Fund.

## TIMOR-LESTE

TIMOR-Leste (formerly known as East Timor) is a country in the early days of nation-building, following centuries of colonisation and decades of violent occupation.

After over 400 years of Portuguese rule came to an end in 1975, East Timor was promptly invaded by nearest neighbour Indonesia. The 24-year Indonesian occupation of Timor was brutal, with over 100,000 Timorese fatalities, possibly as high as 200,000.

In 1999, following a referendum in which Timorese people voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia, the country went into UN administration.

It was finally established as an independent state in May 2002, making it one of the world's newest nations.

Timor-Leste became a priority country for Irish Aid assistance in 2003. However, the Irish Aid representative office in Dili closed in October 2012 due to Irish government cuts, although some initiatives there will continue to receive funding until the end of 2013.