

# East Timor's campaign to defeat hunger

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By John Loizou

Dili, November 27: The tapping of a river to irrigate about 600 hectares to grow rice with mung and soya bean as subsidiary crops would not normally draw much attention in modern Southeast Asia.

But in East Timor the opening of an-about-\$US1.4-million-project based on the building of a four-kilometre-long canal to draw water from the Karau Ulun River, in the Manufahi district about five hours drive south of the capital Dili, shows the determination of the ruling Fretilin Government to eventually ensure "food security" for the country's about one million mostly malnourished predominately rural citizens.

It means the river that flows into the Timor Sea all-year-round can be used to provide water for about 200 lowland subsistence farmers in a mountainous country that is dominated first by a prolonged dry and then the intense "wet" of a western monsoon.

The project was built in about 14 months with money provided by the World Bank and managed by East Timor's government.

The opening by Deputy Prime Minister and Agricultural Minister Estanolisla Maria Alexio da Silva was particularly symbolic because it went ahead despite the violence that forced as many as 150,000 people in the newly-independent republic from their homes and the resignation of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri.

The farmers, who each work allotments of about 2.5 hectares and who, like most of East Timor's farmers do not use fertiliser, would now be given technical help to ensure they could make proper use of the water, the Agricultural Minister said.

Although he did not say so, a major benefit of the project should be the elimination for the farmers and their families of the so-called "hungry season" that traditionally prevails throughout East Timor and the islands of neighbouring eastern Indonesia between November and March each year.

And similar irrigation projects have been undertaken on the high Maliano plateau of central-west East Timor can be expected to do the same.

Maize — the word used by the Spanish for the crop the conquistadors found growing throughout the Americas rather than the corn of North America — predominates as the staple crop of East Timor's highlands, but since independence, the government, with help from the United Nations agency, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, has built public grain silos and supported domestic rice production with help from Japan.

As Lecturer in Political Economy at the University of Sydney Tim Anderson

explains: “Despite a lack of resources, a focus on rice production is now embedded in the country’s food security policy.”

Anderson, a regular visitor to East Timor, uses the latest United Nations Development Programme report that shows that domestic rice production rose from 37,000 tonnes in 1998 to 65,000 tonnes in 2004 to support his argument.

The programme means less dependence on imported rice — from Viet Nam, Thailand and Indonesia — although the midyear crisis has disrupted regular supplies.

The East Timor government acknowledges the need for national “food security” in a comprehensive policy statement tabled in the country’s parliament.

“The main causes of food insecurity are not only due to the widespread practice of subsistence agriculture, but also to the lack of alternative sources of income which result in low purchasing power and lack of access to food. As a result of insufficient use of inputs and improved technology, production and productivity are very low,” it says.

“However, this productive sector has special importance because it is the main source of food, employment and income for two-thirds of the population, mainly for those who live in rural areas.”

The statement says the Food Security Policy will not only form the basis of East Timor meeting the Millennium Development Goals set by the General Assembly of the United Nations but will also “materialise” the government’s policy to eradicate hunger in all its forms.

The statement accepts the definition of food security provided by the World Food Summit 1996 as the basis for East Timor’s policy.

This is: “All people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food according to their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

It means conditions necessary are:

Access: All people must have physical, social and economic access to sufficient food. Major means of access are subsistence food production and income from employment and sales;

Availability: Food supplies must be sufficient to adequately feed the population;

Stability: Access and availability must be ensured at all times and provisions must be made to cater for seasonal supply variations and production shortfalls in the wake of droughts or other natural disaster;

and Effective utilisation: The food consumed must be safe and nutritious.