

Timor-Leste tackles illiteracy with Cuban help

By Bob Boughton*

With nearly 50% of its adult population unable to read or write, Timor-Leste (East Timor) has embarked on a nationwide literacy campaign using a method developed by Cuban educators.

The campaign was launched yesterday in Dili by the Acting Prime Minister, Estanislau Da Silva.

The aim is to halve the current rate of illiteracy within five years, and have all adults literate by 2015.

Cuban government assistance is already crucial to Timor-Leste's health care effort. About 700 Timorese are studying medicine in Cuba while an additional 105 undertake study in Timor-Leste under Cuban doctors' guidance. Some 230 Cuban doctors are working throughout Timor-Leste.

Cuban assistance was initiated by former Timor-Leste Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and appears to be universally welcomed by the country's leadership. Alkatiri's successor and now Presidential candidate, Jose Ramos-Horta, recently praised the Cubans' dedication and preparedness to work 'in simple, precarious conditions, accepting the hardship.'

Following a visit to Cuba by then PM Alkatiri, the first Cuban literacy advisers arrived in November 2005, to begin their study of conditions in Timor-Leste and prepare for the campaign. The Alkatiri government committed funds to the Ministry of Education and Culture to begin the campaign in this financial year.

The crisis of April to June 2006 and its fallout caused some interruption, because the pilot programs in Dili to trial the materials were attacked by gangs and had to be

stopped and re-started in different areas. These pilots have now been completed, in Baucau and Liqueca, and the lessons learned incorporated into the materials now being prepared, and into the process for selection and training of monitors.

The literacy campaign is led by a National Commission with funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture of up to \$800,000 between now and June 30, to launch the campaign, employ and train staff and purchase materials.

Literacy classes begin in April in all 442 sucos (towns) throughout the country. These first classes will begin a process which will continue into next financial year, and for every year afterwards until the objectives are achieved.

The literacy classes will follow a method of distance education using televised classes shown on DVD, and supervised by trained Timorese monitors, recruited in the villages in which they will work and from university students who have volunteered to assist.

This method, devised by the Cuban Literacy Institute, IPLAC, and already running in many other countries, has been endorsed by UNESCO as a proven method for use in mass literacy campaigns. It is known by its Portuguese name, 'Sim Eu Posso' which in English means, "Yes, I can." By the end of each course of sixty-five one-hour lessons, an illiterate person has learned to read and write simple sentences about her or his own life.

Each of the Cuban advisers will be 'shadowed' by a Timorese counterpart, from the General Coordinator to the sub-district level supervisors. While the DVD material and the exercise books teach basic literacy in Portuguese, the monitors' manual has been written in a combination of Portuguese and the other principal local language, Tetum, to facilitate use in areas where there is less use of Portuguese.

The key to the success of this campaign, like all mass literacy campaigns around the world, is political commitment. This must come not only from the government but also from all sectors of society. And within the government and the key state

institutions, the commitment must exist from the top to the bottom, from the President and the Council of Ministers down to the Chefe do Suco and the Suco council.

Moreover, all government ministries, not just the Ministry of Education and Culture, are called on to support and participate in the campaign, as are the churches, and the organizations of civil society. This mass mobilisation of energy and resources is to be achieved through the creation of the National Commission, and a series of sub-commissions to take responsibility for different aspects of the campaign. The National Commission structure is then replicated at district and sub-district level.

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