

Displaced people in Timor down by half - Minister optimistic

By Lucia Salinas-Briones in Dili

The tiny new nation of Timor Leste hit a crisis in April 2006 when a coordinated plan to destabilize the country was activated by undemocratic forces that continue to push their strategy today.

Over 150,000 people in the capital, Dili, were forced to flee their homes because of these irresponsible actions against a democratically elected government. Many of these "IDPs" - internally displaced people - saw their houses being burned and all their goods destroyed right in front of them. Many were badly beaten and threatened with the worst if they didn't leave.

A great majority of the IDPs are sympathizers of the FRETILIN party, which was democratically elected to government with 57.3% of the votes in August 2001. (FRETILIN is the Revolutionary Front for Independent East Timor, formed in 1974.)

At 32 years of age, Arsenio Bano is the youngest minister in the Timor Leste government and has an inspiring message. He is working hard to solve the toughest reality the crisis has brought to his country - looking after these 150,000 refugees and getting them back home.

Over the last six months his Ministry of Labour and Community Reinsertion has been responsible for protection and safety in IDP Camps, as well as providing them with basic needs like water, food, sanitation and health care.

"Six months ago we had 150,000 IDPs, today we have 70,000," says Minister Bano. "We have worked hard to create the conditions for them to return where they belong and feel safe".

Stage One of the refugee crisis was to provide shelter and basic needs to the 150,000 people that abandoned their houses through terror. Stage Two - today's situation - is to bring them back home (if they still have one) or provide them with a new home. So far the number of IDPs has been reduced by half. Minister Bano believes Stage Two might take another six months.

"This is our country and it is our responsibility to make sure we have the capacity to deal with our problems," he says. Although they receive significant assistance from international aid agencies and donors, it is Arsenio's ministry that coordinates all the assistance and has succeeded in averting a humanitarian crisis. The job is also done in conjunction with other ministries - such as Health, Education, Interior, Justice, Secretariat of State for Youth and Sports. The minister has a contingency plan to deal with the coming wet season so that nobody is unprotected.

Women and children are both very vulnerable groups, according to the Minister. "We are working with the Education Minister, UNICEF and other international agencies, which are providing non-formal education for the children in the centres. Women are very vulnerable so there is an important project to prevent sexual harassment. Several constructions that will be safe places for women in the centers are to be finished by mid-November".

In another project, Bano's ministry is working with the World Food Program in providing supplementary food for pregnant women and new-born babies. The crisis caused the departure of some NGOs that were delivering programs for women, and many of their centres were destroyed.

Minister Bano believes that there is a great need to deal with a whole number of issues at the community level and he enthusiastically promotes them. "We need to get people to talk to each other, we need to be able to heal the impact of the crisis". Programs of mutual acceptance are being implemented. Protection programs - implying trusting each other as community and solving problems without violence - are also currently running. Posters, flyers, radio programs, sport and cultural activities are encouraging IDPs to look at the human and social side of the problem and to talk to each other.

Security is a major issue. It is probably the main reason why the refugees don't want to go back home. They have lost all confidence and it's not only the international police force currently in Timor Leste who have to provide it. "I think that has to come from our own Timorese. It is a process we are doing by dialogue, by discussion and it will take some time. There is a lack of trust in international forces, they don't know the people!"

The Minister is realistic about what has happened and optimistic about the future. "Timor Leste has experienced a crisis that has taught people a tough lesson and this has reached all levels of our society. The crisis has had an impact on the whole country and we still have weak institutions, and that's why we need assistance. We also learnt that we need to be prepared in the future so these things don't happen again.

"The current crisis will be solved. I think that if we have more political will - not only from the government but everyone in civil society, other important institutions like parliament and the judiciary, the president, everyone - we will not let the country collapse. That would end a commitment that started 24 years ago when we set out to achieve independence".

Minister Arsenio Bano is a supporter of former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. "Mari Alkatiri's contribution to Timor Leste has been tremendous," he says.

"Mari Alkatiri led a very strong transformation with a 20-year vision. In the past four years he managed, among many other things, to establish a whole school system for the children of Timor Leste. He managed to get 350,000 children back to school. Our challenge now is to improve the quality of our education.

"We have also established a health system, nearly across the country. We have worked hard for this and we now have doctors in nearly all districts.

"In the past four years we have secured funding for the coming generation. And most importantly, we have achieved all this without borrowing one penny. In the past four years we have become financially independent".

Minister Arsenio Bano is emphatic. "The Petroleum Fund, which is where the current budget of Timor Leste comes from, is not a proposal of the current government. We have more than tripled our budget thanks to Mari Alkatiri. His contribution to Timor Leste has been tremendous".

Minister Bano joined the FRETILIN party not long ago and he is very proud of it. "I am very proud to say that I belong to FRETILIN. FRETILIN brought us independence. FRETILIN's vision is to get us out of poverty. FRETILIN also believes in a national identity, not only in a cultural but in a practical way".

Minister Bano says that anyone who thinks that FRETILIN is a marxist-oriented party is ignorant. "If FRETILIN was marxist we would not have other political parties here, there would be not foreign companies investing here. We have a type of liberal economy here. We don't forbid any body to come into this country. Our partners and advisers are from Australia, Norway, USA, and Portugal, not from China or Cuba".

Minister Arsenio Bano is married to an Australian and has two children. The youngest government minister of Timor Leste has been involved in politics since he was twelve and wants to keep going. "I intend to stay here, working for the government as long as I am needed, that's the idea. I love my country and want it to become prosperous, with opportunities for everyone".

Minister Arsenio Bano will be in Sydney on November 22-24. Those wanting to get real honest information about Timor Leste would do well to talk to him.

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