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2007 Parliamentary Elections

“Defending Timor-Leste’s independence”

Media release

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Australian interference in Timor Leste elections is unacceptable – FRETILIN

Australian government criticism of a plan to develop Timor Leste’s military amounts to political interference in the country’s election campaign and is an unacceptable infringement of Timorese sovereignty, leaders of the majority party FRETILIN said today.

Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer and so-called “defence experts” with links to the Australian intelligence establishment, have criticised “Force 2020”, a long-term plan developed in Timor-Leste through the Ministry of Defence.

Force 2020 aims to overcome the great difficulties experienced in the formation of the army under the UN Transitional Authority before May 2002 through to May 2004, and in its development under the First Constitutional Government since then.

FRETILIN Party President Francisco Guterres Lu Olo said today: “We find it incredible that the Australian Foreign Minister would say that we cannot have armed helicopters and small but effective warships to patrol our offshore petroleum resources and fisheries. After all, doesn’t the Australian Defence Force now operate in our country, with exactly such equipment?”

“There is nothing excessive in Force 2020 which calls for a 3000-strong military. Our present military is 1,500 regulars and 1,500 reservists.

“This story is based on a wild exaggeration by *The Australian* newspaper last week, over the implementation of a decision to delegate authority for procurements of up to US\$100,000 to the Ministry of Defence. This is a delegation enjoyed by other Ministries, and is based on the development of management capacity in the F-FDTL.

“Contrary to the assertions by *The Australian*, there is no undermining of parliamentary authority in this move.

“Force 2020 is the national plan for the armed forces, and our nation can fund it over 13 years”, Lu Olo said. “The plan is about modernizing and professionalizing our armed forces and making it interoperable with the armed forces of other nations.

“Interoperability will allow the Timor-Leste army to participate in international peace keeping missions and work effectively with the national armies of other South East Asian countries and also Australia to counter the global threat of terrorism.”

Lu Olo added, “Having a modern army is not just about defending our national sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also our national resources. For example, the Timor-Leste government loses US\$35 million in fishing resources to illegal fishing every year and it is our right and duty as a country to protect this valuable renewable resource for the benefit of our people.”

Lu Olo said FALINTIL, the guerrilla army which fought for independence against the Indonesian military occupation, finished the struggle in 1999 as a series of small armed units, at most platoon size.

“Its transition into battalion and company-size units in the new army was highly artificial,” Lu Olo said. “This was the low-cost option identified by the Queens College study commissioned by the United Nations – low cost because only two barracks were required. However, no Timorese officer had the experience to manage units of this size.

“Force 2020 was an open process to re-think and reorganise the army (F-FDTL), but it was cut short by the upheaval of January-June 2006, when a large minority of the army, and the police command, were led into a political and finally military campaign to overthrow the elected government.

“The Australian government has been aware of the Force 2020 process all along, because it had senior

advisers in the Defence Ministry.”

The Australian news magazine *The Bulletin*, in its June 6, 2006 issue, reported the bitter feelings of senior Australian military trainers sent to help form the new army in 2000 and later. These officers asserted that the Australian government never intended that F-FDTL would become a cohesive well-trained force, and that the training program was a fiasco.

The Bulletin article quoted an Australian Defence Force Minute to its Chief, dated May 10, 2001, which stated:

"The first objective ... is to pursue Australia's broad strategic interests in East Timor, namely denial, access and influence. The strategic interest of denial seeks to ensure that no foreign power gains an unacceptable level of access to East Timor, and is coupled with the complementary objective of seeking access to East Timor for Australia, in particular the ADF. Australia's strategic interests can also be protected and pursued more effectively if Australia maintains some degree of influence over East Timor's decision-making."

FRETILIN Secretary General Dr Mari Alkatiri said FRETILIN is committed to the National Development Plan, which gives top priority to education, health and housing, along with urban job creation in a major infrastructure program, and continued development of agriculture, to achieve annual 7% growth in Gross Domestic Product.

“However, it is clear from the tragic events of the last 15 months that we must rebuild our army and police forces on a sound, professional and non partisan basis, able to assist in national development, and able to play a role in UN peacekeeping missions,” Dr Alkatiri said.

“The debate initiated in Australia by several self acclaimed experts on Timor-Leste political issues to discredit and stop the Force 2020 Plan reflects the ADF view that it must have influence over government decisions in Timor Leste, and it must maintain a presence in our country. This is an unacceptable infringement of the sovereignty which hundreds of thousands of our people died to achieve.”

Dr Alkatiri said: “This Australian government and Australian media interference in our election campaign is calculated to further discredit FRETILIN by casting doubt on our deep commitment to overcome poverty and restore peace to our country. We strenuously object to this political interference.”

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