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2007 Parliamentary Elections

“Defending Timor-Leste’s independence”

Media release

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New judicial officers for Timor Leste

Timor Leste’s Minister for Justice, and FRETILIN candidate for the upcoming elections Dr. Domingos Sarmento has welcomed the swearing in of eleven Timorese judges, nine prosecutors and seven public defenders, nearly 40 per cent of them women.

The judges, prosecutors and public defenders are the first intake to have completed the two and a half year training course at the Legal Training Center established at the initiative of the FRETILIN government in 2002.

They are the first post-independence Timor-Leste nationals ever to have been professionally trained and certified to work as judicial officers.

“I would like to congratulate all of them for all their dedication, diligence and persistence over the past two and a half years. This is a very proud day for me, the government and for the people of Timor-Leste whom they have been trusted to serve and whose constitutional and civil rights they have taken on the responsibility of safeguarding,” said Sarmento, who was Dili District Court President between 2000-2001.

“We should also be very proud that 40 per cent of them are women. Our young nation faces a great challenge to redress the imbalance between men and women. This task will be helped by the fact that over one third of our judicial corps are women.

“From its formation in 1974, throughout our long struggle for independence and sovereignty, FRETILIN has maintained the liberation of women as one of its main social and political objectives. When I was a combatant with the FRETILIN forces during the Indonesian occupation between 1975 and 1980, I fought alongside, and with the invaluable assistance of many women compatriots, including some who died during the struggle.

“The growing role of women in the legal system and other areas of society is a fitting recognition of those women who gave so much for the ideals of an independent, democratic society where the rule of law prevails,” Sarmento said.

Another 15 judicial officers are undergoing training and will be eligible to take up their roles later this year. The recently sworn in judges, prosecutors and public defenders have all been working in their respective roles since being sworn in as interns on 3 June 2006.

“They took up their positions at a very difficult time, soon after the political and constitutional crisis broke out. What is normally a very difficult job was made even more difficult by the attacks on the judiciary since that time,” Sarmento said.

“They have already acted with the political and ethical independence we would wish them to display. As Timorese judges they will come under a lot of pressure; political, social, from personal interests, family interests and international interests. I have faith that the high quality professional and ethical training FRETILIN initiated has equipped them to meet these and other challenges.

“FRETILIN has always been committed to improving the justice sector. The newly sworn in judicial officers are examples of good collaboration between the government, UNDP, other bilateral donors and especially the Community of Portuguese Speaking Nations to develop the capacity of judicial officers in a sustainable way.

“When the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) appointed me as a judge in February 2000, our training by the UN was to take us to the Darwin Magistrates Court for one week’s judicial familiarization training. I am confident from my own personal experience that these judges and future judges coming out of the Judicial Training Center will be eminently better equipped than we were.

“The FRETILIN government is committed to increasing funding and support for the work of judges, prosecutors and public defenders in order to assure their total independence. One example is the construction of residences for judicial officers who have to relocate with their families to the courts. We can do this now that we have more money from the petroleum fund, money we did not have up until this year.”

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