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United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor

UNMISSET PRESS RELEASE

World Aids Day

Several hundred in Dili march, PM pledges resources to fight virus

(Dili, 1 December) – An estimated 1,000 people took part in a march in Dili yesterday afternoon to mark World Aids Day this Monday. Participants walked from the Ministry of Health to Dili Stadium where RDTL Prime-Minister Mari Alkatiri and the Health Minister Rui Araújo both warned of the dangers of HIV/AIDS and urged the population, particularly the youth, to take steps to protect themselves and prevent the spread of the virus. The Prime-Minister also pledged resources to fight the virus.

“The HIV/AIDS pandemic continues to decimate lives in unprecedented figures. It is targeting the very fibre of development and reproduction, in that most infections are in the age group between 19 and 49 years”, said the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Timor-Leste, Ambassador Kamallesh Sharma, in a speech read by the Acting Force Commander [Brigadier-General Paul Retter] at Dili Stadium. There are over 40 million people infected with HIV globally, 5 million of whom became infected this year alone, the highest annual rate recorded.

Timor-Leste has a low infection rate, according to estimates by the World Health Organization, and it can be kept low with a comprehensive HIV prevention programme using strategies such as aggressive awareness campaigns, Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT), multi-sectoral collaboration, fighting stigma, prevention of mother to child transmission and provision of antiretroviral drugs. But the SRSG cautioned that, if left unchecked, the virus will spread like wildfire. “Since the impact of HIV/AIDS hinges on development, I would like to urge the leadership and all stakeholders to relentlessly fight and nip it in the bud”.

The SRSG also urged Church leaders and *Suco* [village] chiefs, who have a very influential role in the community, to partner with government and NGOs and play a role in the fight against HIV/AIDS. UNMISSET’S HIV/AIDS Focal Point Joyce Ng’wane held a meeting with over 30 *Suco* Chiefs and District Administrators to enlist their help in sensitising the community to the dangers posed by the virus. UNMISSET has already run a training course for peer educators. Twelve PNTL Officers from 10 districts and 5 civilians from local NGOs participated in the training.

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(photos available)

For further information contact:

Marcia Poole

Spokesperson/UNMISET

Mobile: + 670 723 0793

Telephone: + 61 8 8946 3900 Ext. 6059