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Baucau police hand-over: ‘Police must be non-partisan and respectful of human rights’

(Baucau, 16 September) – The Minister of State Administration and Minister of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Ana Pessoa, today said that Timor-Leste wants a police force that is “professional, truly non-partisan and that shows full respect for human rights”. The Minister was speaking at Baucau Stadium during the ceremony to mark the hand-over of policing responsibilities in the district from UNPOL to PNTL.

Ana Pessoa thanked the UN and the countries that have helped establish and develop PNTL, and went on to remind the police officers of the challenge they face. She said that PNTL is a young institution in a State still under construction. “We face no easy task, especially when we have as starting point a [public] image that is a legacy from the times under military occupation, when police flaunted and abused their power”. The Minister added that such image gives rise to doubts and mistrust among the public, and that PNTL must work to earn their confidence. “We must not mistake brutality for firmness”, she said to the applause of local officials and the general public. Ana Pessoa added that the legitimate use of force can only be justified when it is a last resort, and even then it must be proportional to the threat or danger in question.

Earlier, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Timor-Leste, Sukehiro Hasegawa, also reminded the PNTL officers that their newly-acquired authority comes with great responsibilities. The DSRSG said that a truly professional, impartial and accountable police force is vital for the maintenance of law and order, and recognised that the process of developing the police takes time. “[This process requires] commitment and determination by each and every one of you, and I ask you to take up this challenge and achieve ultimately the goal of a professional and impartial police force”, he added.

The DSRSG said that UNMISSET will continue to work closely with the government and the district administration to provide support to PNTL, adding that 9 UNPOL Technical Advisers will remain in the district.

After the outgoing UNPOL [Rob Robertson] and the incoming PNTL [Pedro Belo] District Commanders signed the hand-over certificate, police officers, firemen and members of Baucau’s

Civil Defence paraded in front of the Minister, the DSRS and other guests, including the Vice-Minister of Interior [Alcino Barris], the Acting PNTL Commissioner [Júlio Hornay], the Acting District Administrator [Miguela Ximenes] and PKF's Deputy Commander [Brigadier-General Paul Retter]. Timorese warriors in traditional attire and schoolchildren also joined the parade.

The hand-over ceremony concluded with a display by members of PNTL's Rapid Intervention Unit of the specialist skills they have been learning in training programmes conducted by Australian, Malaysian and US police. Equipped with full commando gear and with black greasepaint on their faces, they simulated an operation to capture a 'terrorist', complete with jumping through fire loops, blank shots and fake bomb explosions, much to the delight and enthusiastic applause of the young men in the audience.

Baucau is the 12th district to be handed over from UNPOL to PNTL. Only Dili District remains under UNPOL and the hand-over is scheduled to take place in January.

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(photos available)

For further information contact:

Marcia Poole

Spokesperson/UNMISSET

Mobile: + 670 723 0793

Telephone: + 61 8 8946 3900 Ext. 6059