

MEDIA BRIEFING NOTE

By UNMISSET Spokesperson's Office

Dili, May 5, 2002

Timor-Leste Government Tables Concrete Action Plans to End Corruption

Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri opened a one-day Workshop on Transparency and Accountability in Dili on 4 May declaring the goal of “zero tolerance” for corruption in his government. He was joined in opening the Workshop by the Special Representative of the Secretary General Kamallesh Sharma who said “We all share a common goal – to develop and maintain effective, accountable, responsive and corruption-free public administration in this country.”

The workshop, organized by the Prime Minister through the office of his Inspector General and with the support of UNMISSET and UNDP, was a follow-up on the International Conference on Transparency and Accountability held on 13 to 14 November 2003. That conference identified areas of potential corruption in Timor-Leste's government and explored the best practices of other countries in dealing with corruption.

The 4 May Workshop moved the government well beyond mere talk to concrete strategies. During the day, nearly a dozen government ministries and other state entities tabled action-plans for enhancing transparency and accountability in their sectors within an explicit timeframe. They included the Ministries of State Administration; Finance and Planning; Education; Transport, Communications and Public Works; and Justice, as well as the Banking and Payment Authority and the Offices of the Inspector General and that of the Prosecutor General.

Commenting on the plans and the Workshop in general, one participant, Jeremy Pope, Co-Director of TIRI (the Governance Action Learning Network) and a veteran consultant on good governance in 60 countries, called TimorLeste's initiatives to deal with corruption “unprecedented”, and said, “The programme here is by far the most impressive I have ever seen.” His praise was echoed by another international participant, Brian Burkedin of Sweden's Raoul Wallenberg Institute, who declared, “I



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don't remember ever before a Prime Minister sitting in a room like this with his ministers talking about transparency and accountability.”

The workshop resounded with lively give-and-take on topics such as how to ensure fair recruitment practices that are not based on political loyalty but on skills; on the importance of high government officials declaring their personal assets; and the need for codes of conduct that provide clear guidelines and for additional capacity building and training.

A recurring theme throughout the day was the need to build a culture of transparency, one that enlisted not just government, but civil society, the media and the church. In addition, both Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and President Xanana Gusmao said that the climate needed to be created where more citizens and civil servants will speak out against specific corruption. “People should be brave enough to denounce corrupt employees,” declared the Prime Minister.

Two lively panel discussions included members of Parliament, representatives of the media and NGO and international development partners. They critiqued the government action-plans and explored the best Timor-Leste and international models for fighting corruption. One panel was chaired by the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General and Resident Representative for UNDP, Sukehiro Hasegawa; the other, the U.S. Ambassador to Timor-Leste, Grover Joseph Rees.

Much discussion centered on key government legislative initiatives currently being considered or recently passed. They include the Civil Service law and one establishing a Provedor (Ombudsman), both of which were recently passed; as well as decrees establishing organic structures for the Timor-Leste Defense and Police Forces that define their structures and functions. The decree regarding the Police was recently enacted and that for the Defense Force remains pending. These laws and degrees can collectively provide much of the framework for improved accountability in the public sector.



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In addition, numerous Workshop participants praised Timor-Leste for having signed, along with 16 other countries, the UN Convention Against Corruption and urged Parliament to ratify it by December 2004.

In assessing the achievements of the Workshop, the Deputy SRSG to the UN Secretary General, Sukehiro Hasegawa called the government's initiatives a sound beginning to ending corruption, but said, "Action plans are never enough", a sentiment heard throughout the day.

"In the final analysis, said Mr. Hasegawa, "the success of any plan requires strong and sustained commitment by the leadership and the culture of transparency to implement the action plans".

Timor-Leste President Xanana Gusmao closed the conference saying, " I will speak in Tetun so that all Timorese can hear me on the radio," a gentle reminder that a culture of transparency must start with all the people, rural and urban alike. He praised the progress the government and participants had made at the one-day Workshop. He also noted that in a couple of weeks Timor-Leste will celebrate two years of Independence. He said a major challenge the country still faces is "combating corruption and instilling a culture of transparency and accountability". He warned that "corruption is the "worst social disease imaginable", and if allowed free rein "destroys whole societies and tears at the very fabric of our way of life".

Ends

