

# **MEDIA BRIEFING NOTE**

**By UNMISSET Spokesperson's Office**

**Dili, 20 April 2004.**

## **Progress in Rebuilding East Timor's Prison System – Human Spirit and Infrastructure Alike**

On 20 April, East Timor inaugurated a new administration building at the Becora Prison to replace the original facility that burned down in January 2003. In the aftermath of the fire, the Danish Government quickly provided the US\$50,000 needed to rebuild the structure. The Danish Government is a long-time supporter in strengthening the Timor-Leste's justice system. It provides some US\$265,000 in overall funding to the "Justice System Programme." The project, which is facilitated by UNDP, is undertaking a range of initiatives to enhance justice in the newly independent country.

The April 20 inauguration of the prison building coincided with the launch of the second training course for prison guards at Becora, and there were plenty of guests on hand. They included the Prime Minister of Timor-Leste, Mari Alkatiri, Justice Minister Domingos Sarnmento, the Acting Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and UNDP Resident Representative Sukehiro Hasegawa and the Danish Ambassador Geert Andersen.

Twenty-three guards, whose training is to be overseen by three experts from Malaysia Technical Cooperative, were officially inducted into the course amidst a spirited demonstration of self-defence and non-lethal incapacitation techniques by veteran prison guards. The objective was to do no harm – to guard or prisoner alike.

Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri praised the Danish Government's support to the justice sector and specifically that of its ambassador, Geert Anderson, to the rebuilding effort, saying, "He made himself immediately available" to ensure the burned building was replaced. In addition, in his remarks Prime Minister Alkatiri made it clear that the main objective of new programmes at the Becora Prison and Timor-Leste's other prisons is to rehabilitate human spirits, not just physical structures.

"A prison is more than buildings and barbed-wire," he said. "Our objective is to help bring prisoners, back to society, so once released, they can contribute to the development of society." He stressed that the prison is a place "where people are entitled to justice, human rights and respect." The prime minister added "attention to justice is urgently needed", noting "only 70 of the 200 prisoners in Becora have yet been convicted of a crime. The rest still await trial".

Justice Minister Domingoes Sarmentos in his address noted that at the time of the fire at Becora prison “there were not enough human resources” to protect the facility, but now, he said, there are some 112 prison staff at the Becora, Gleno and Baucau prisons and recruitment is continuing. He also noted that with the help of UNMISSET’s Human Rights Unit and others, a human rights course for prison guards is being conducted from April to July 2004. Additional structural rehabilitation is also soon underway at some other prison facilities, including, Suai and Ermera, according to the Justice Minister.

Justice Minister Sarmentos spoke with greatest pride about vocational training programmes that are about to start with the support of UNDP and the “The Justice System” Programme, integrating already existing well-proven voluntary initiatives. “The training, in civil construction and carpentry, and eventually other economic activity, will help prisoners gain real skills,” declared the Justice Minister.

The Acting Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and UNDP Resident Representative Sukehiro Hasegawa expressed his pleasure that UNDP has been able to be a facilitator in the development of Timor-Leste’s justice sector. He stressed the importance of the human rights initiatives Timor-Leste is incorporating, including human rights training for prison guards. He said the principle of respect for human beings, and particularly prisoners, was articulated by a famous former prisoner -- Nelson Mandela. Paraphrasing Mr. Mandela, the UNDP Resident Representative said, “It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside the jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizen but how it treats its lowest one.

Mr. Hasegawa praised the Ministry of Justice, with the support of the Danish Government, in paying particular attention to the reformation and social rehabilitation of inmates through constructive activities. “The experience of prison life should not leave prisoners in a worse condition than when they started the sentence”, said Mr. Hasegawa. “I see the government’s investment in the prison sector as part of its effort in the justice sector to lay the foundations for a society based on access to justice, rule of law and respect for human rights, and I commend you for your efforts.”

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