

MEDIA BRIEFING NOTE

By UNMISSET Spokesperson's Office

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Bringing New Voice to East Timor's Justice System

Justice in Timor-Leste got a stronger voice on 27 April, as the Court of Appeals introduced a simultaneous interpretation system. The system enables courtroom parties – the judges, defense and prosecution – to talk to each other for the first time in languages that all the participants can understand. It also will help speed-up the overall trial process.

The high-tech audio system includes multiple microphones and receivers for courtroom desks and for the sound proof booths of the interpreters. In addition it includes 56 portable, multi-channel listening devices. Now courtroom spectators can follow the trial process as well.

“This is a very important step for us,” says Portuguese Judge Jose Calvario Antunes. “It permits all of the parties in the courtroom to understand what’s occurring. Even the public can better follow the process”.

Timorese Judge Jacinta C. da Costa praises the new interpretation system and points to the linguistic challenges of the courtroom: “The parties, defense, the accused, the prosecution, they all speak various languages, even the audience speaks a variety of languages,” she says. “With no interpretation, there were often misunderstandings as to what had transpired.”

But it was a Timorese courtroom spectator who gave the new system the highest marks. “With this equipment, the hearing process will now be like that in any other nation”, said João Naro. “It makes it faster to understand and decide cases.” He added, “The new interpretation system is much better than that used during the Indonesian period.”

Two complete sets of simultaneous interpretation equipment have been donated to the Timor-Leste Justice Sector. They were purchased with US\$80,000 in support from the Danish Government, through the UNDP-facilitated “Justice System



Programme”. In addition to the Court of Appeals, the Special Panels for Serious Crimes will share use of the first simultaneous interpretation system at the Court of Appeals facility.

Simultaneous interpretation is not the end-all solution to courtroom interpretation and translation problems. There remains a real shortage in trained Timorese interpreters and translators and ones up to speed in the legal jargon. “With an insufficient number of interpreters it is often difficult to translate for everyone in the audience”, says Judge da Costa. “Priority in interpretation must be given to the courtroom parties”.

The court is now relying principally on a small staff of international interpreters and translators skilled in Portuguese, English and Bahasa-Indonesia. But soon a new capacity building effort is about to get under way!

By the end of June an eight-month pilot project is expected to begin training Timorese interpreters and translators at the National University of Timor-Leste. The capacity building programme is being funded principally by the Governments of Ireland, Denmark and Sweden and by USAID through UNDP’s “200 Posts for Timor-Leste Programme” and the “Stengthening the Justice Sector Programme”. To facilitate the project, the Timor-Leste Appeals Court is lending its second set of simultaneous interpretation equipment for use in the training.

“To secure equal and fair access to justice in a multi-lingual society such as Timor-Leste, qualified interpreters are of paramount importance,” says Isabel Feijo, Translation and Interpretation Coordinator for the Training Programme. “And in order for the population to abide by the law and avoid unwanted encounters with the judiciary, Tetum versions of all legal documents are indispensable and so are skilled legal translators”.

Sixteen Timorese are to be trained as interpreters and 20 as translators. They will also strengthen their understanding of courtroom terminology through a legal glossary that will be developed with UNDP support by the National Institute of Linguistics. One objective is to develop Tetum as a fully functional working language in the Justice sector.

The languages of the actual training will be the two national languages, Tetum and Portuguese and the two working languages, English and Bahasa-Indonesia, with the latter being accepted as only a source or passive language only.



“By the end of training, successful trainees will have gained international standard levels of expertise, says Isabel Feijo. “They will also be offered a three-year contract and an attractive salary on a special scale within the Civil Service.”

It is envisioned that once the initial training course has been completed training will be made available to other Timor-Leste Public Service Sections and that ultimately a full-time interpretation and translation course will be established at the National University.

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