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# Timor-Leste a leader in human rights?

In October of last year, during the press conference to launch our annual public report on the human rights situation in Timor-Leste, I stated that Timor-Leste was positioned to become a regional and global human rights leader.

That statement has led to many questions and sceptical professions of disbelief from Timorese and international friends alike. “How can you say a country so poor, with so many problems, can be a regional or global human rights leader?”, came the refrain.

A fair question. Measuring a country’s human rights performance is often subjective. We don’t keep “league tables” on human rights in the way we do for economic performance or human development, or even more precisely, for football teams. However, we can measure the number and severity of violations reported to us in an objective way and some statistics speak for themselves.

For example, the number of cases of extrajudicial executions – 0, cases of torture – 0, cases of enforced or involuntary disappearances – 0, cases of attacks on human rights defenders – 0, cases of arbitrary arrest or detention of political opposition – 0. These numbers speak volumes about the amount of progress that Timor-Leste has made since the restoration of independence in 2002 and indeed since the Crisis of 2006.

On the international stage, Timor-Leste is represented on the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the primary international human rights mechanism to review and improve the rights of women globally and on the board of the newly created UN Women in New York. In October 2011, Timor-Leste will undergo its first Universal Periodic Review (UPR) before the Human Rights Council in Geneva. This is the new human rights mechanism by which every member state of

the United Nations undergoes a peer review of its human rights record once every four years. The Ministry of Justice has been leading a process of public consultations and has begun drafting the Government’s UPR report based on inputs from those consultations.



Reading our Tetum HR cartoon books

The Provedoria for Human Rights and Justice and civil society are also working on a report to share with the Human Rights Council as part of the UPR process.

Timor-Leste is also cooperating with the Special Procedures mechanisms of the Human Rights Council. Most recently, from 7 to 14 February 2011, the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances was invited to conduct an official mission to Timor-Leste.

The National Parliament of Timor-Leste devotes a plenary session of Parliament each year to honour International Human Rights Day and to review a particular aspect of human rights in the country.

A culture of human rights cannot be developed overnight. In reality it takes decades of work.

Even countries with great wealth and high levels of development are far from perfect and have to make continuous efforts to im-

prove their human rights records. The critical indicator, in my view, is if a country is committed to improving rather than sliding backwards and then proves that commitment through action, implementation of laws and standards, and increasing investment in the basic economic and social rights of all citizens without discrimination.

For the vast majority of citizens of Timor-Leste their primary human rights concern is about realization of their basic economic, social and cultural rights.

They want to realize their rights to education, health care, food, housing and an adequate livelihood.

The Government’s commitment to achieve the Millennium Development Goals is about realizing these basic human rights.

Unlike many less fortunate countries around the world Timor-Leste has no external or internal debt and is blessed with abundant natural resources.

Ensuring that this wealth is invested wisely and ethically in the best interests of all citizens, especially to improve the lives of the many children who remain malnourished or undernourished, is the primary human rights challenge. Having touched upon some of the positive developments and the principal challenge, let me now turn to some of the other key challenges remaining to make Timor-Leste a true and lasting human rights leader. Firstly, efforts to professionalize and train the national police (PNTL) and the military (F-FDTL) should continue for the foreseeable future. Continuous training and professional development is the norm for such forces globally and Timor-Leste should be no different. In the coming years we hope to see members of the PNTL and F-FDTL beside us in UN Missions around the world contributing to global peace, security and human rights.