

East Timor: Rice rations for internal refugees cut off

By Will Fulgenzi
15 May 2008

Tens of thousands of East Timorese refugees, known as internally displaced persons, are threatened with starvation as international relief agencies cease provision of food aid to camps in the nation's capital, Dili. Last month the World Food Program (WFP), a UN agency, cut off its regular rice rations to the refugee centres. In February the organisation had reduced the per-person monthly rice ration from eight to four kilograms.

The refugee camps were first set up after 150,000 people fled their homes as violence erupted in 2006. Two years later, 100,000 people—one-tenth of the entire population—remain classified as internally displaced people (IDPs). About 30,000 refugees live in camps in and outside of Dili, with the remaining 70,000 forced to take refuge with friends and family.

Conditions in the camps are appalling. A report released by the European-based International Crisis Group (ICG) on March 31, titled “Timor-Leste’s Displacement Crisis”, revealed some aspects of the situation.

The ICG stated: “The UN reports that the displacements have been accompanied by increased incidence of respiratory diseases, malaria, diarrhoea and malnutrition—though the latter is ameliorated in the camps by the food distribution program. During the rains, some camps flood, while in others toilet blocks leak or overflow.... No action has been taken over camps identified in May and July 2007 studies as high priorities to be closed on the grounds of poor sanitation. The camps are a particularly problematic environment for women and children. The overcrowded tents and toilet block provide little privacy. Children are exposed to risks related to inadequate shelter and living conditions. Children, women, the elderly and other vulnerable groups are all at higher risk of exploitations for various forms of abuse—cases of prostitution and forced human trafficking have been reported.”

The report went on to highlight the extreme poverty

experienced by people living in the camps: “The population of the camps is a cross-section of Timorese society. As in the population at large, unemployment levels are extremely high.... Each IDP with work is likely to be supporting a substantial number of relatives. For those without employment, little structured activity is available beyond participation in criminal activity and martial arts gangs.”

Many refugees are still too frightened to return to their homes after the violence of 2006, while others had their houses destroyed. For many people, however, the threat of hunger remains the main reason why they stay in the camps. East Timor remains one of the most impoverished nations in the world, with high unemployment and at least 40 percent of the population living below the official poverty line of 55 US cents per day. Until last month, refugees and their families in the camps were at least provided with a basic food ration, even though women and children had to wait in line each month for up to six hours to receive their allotted four kilograms of rice and half litre of cooking oil.

The AFP interviewed several refugees at one makeshift camp in a converted convent in Dili where 7,000 people are now concentrated. Grigorio Sousa and his son have been living in a tent for nearly two years. “I really want to go home as soon as possible, but I do not know where I could go after here,” Grigorio said. “That is why I am still living here. If the government gives us the choice and helps us financially, I will return to my village.”

Filomena Soares has lived in the camp with her family since their home in the west of the country was set on fire during the unrest. “We don’t have a home to go back to,” she told the news agency. “Even if we wanted to leave, where would we go? We can’t just live under the stars. We are ready to go back if the state provides us with financial assistance to repair our home and make it liveable again. Security is not a problem for us now, the

people there want to welcome us back.”

The WFP has denied allegations that its decision to cut off food aid to the IDPs is aimed at dispersing the refugees and shutting down the camps. UN officials told the Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) that a survey that they had conducted revealed that “only half of the 70,000 displaced registered in the camps and at host families were actually food insecure.” The WFP insisted that they were obliged to also assist those people who needed food aid but were not refugees. The agency, however, did not explain why they would not help all those in need in East Timor.

It is not clear to what extent the WFP was influenced by the escalating world price of food commodities, including rice. Since the start of 2006, largely as a result of financial speculation on world financial markets, the average price of food has risen 217 percent. This inflation has affected the WFP’s work in South-East Asia. In Cambodia, for example, the high price of rice has led to the suspension of a program providing free breakfasts to 450,000 poor schoolchildren. World food inflation has severely affected ordinary East Timorese. The country imports around 60 percent of its rice needs, and prices have spiralled in recent months. According to one report, a 35-kilogram bag of rice sold for \$US13 in February but now costs \$US20, and in some remote areas \$US27.

Spiralling inflation will further exacerbate the difficulties faced by the internally displaced people who are being forced to leave the camps.

The East Timorese government of Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao has failed to allocate any funds toward humanitarian food aid. State Secretary for Social Assistance Jacinto De Seus stated: “It’s something that the government should take over, but unfortunately we didn’t anticipate it during the budget discussion for 2008.” This lacks all credibility. The WFP’s decision to slash food aid had been expected, and the Gusmao government earlier supported the UN agency’s decision to cut rice rations in half. The reality is that the government has made no attempt to make up for the food aid shortfall because it wants to shut the refugee camps.

Similarly, no international aid donor, including Australia, has offered to provide the necessary funds to provide rice to the IDP centres. The Australian government and foreign policy establishment has long been openly discussing the need to disperse the camps, which are regarded as a potentially explosive source of social and political instability in the country. The recent International Crisis Group paper on the crisis follows

numerous other reports that have warned of the unsustainability of leaving 10 percent of East Timor’s population as homeless internal refugees.

Previous attempts to close the IDP centres involved inducements—including an offer to subsidise the rebuilding of refugees’ homes destroyed in 2006—and outright force and repression. In February 2007, Australian troops shot dead two refugees who were trying to prevent their camp near Dili airport being bulldozed by government and international security forces. With such methods failing to move the refugees on, they are going to be effectively starved out. Labor’s foreign minister Stephen Smith announced on May 1 an additional aid package of \$30 million to the WFP, of which just \$1 million has been allocated to East Timor. This sum is a drop in the ocean compared to the food needs of the East Timorese population and will certainly not make up for the cessation of the WFP’s rice ration program in the IDP camps.

All of this only further demonstrates the fraudulence of the Australian government’s claim that its operations in East Timor are based on a humanitarian concern for the population. Canberra expended significant resources on military-led interventions in 1999 and 2006 in order to shut out rival powers and ensure its ongoing control of the lucrative Timor Sea oil and gas reserves. The well-being of the population of “independent” East Timor has never been a factor in the operations of successive Liberal and Labor governments.

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