



Submission No 38

Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste

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Submission from The Friends of Manatuto Regarding the Inquiry into

Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste

Conducted by the Foreign Affairs's Sub-Committee of Federal Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, March 2013

The Friends of Manatuto

The Friends of Manatuto is a community group based in The City of Kingston in the southern suburbs of Melbourne that has a Friendship relationship with the community of the sub-district of Manatuto, Timor Leste. The group has been in operation since 2002 and in that time has completed a number of projects in Manatuto and made numerous links with the community including:

- Support of a women's pottery co-operative
- Funding for the installation of piped water to 2 suco's near to Manatuto town
- 3 visits to Manatuto by members of the group in 2003, 2008 and 2011 with another visit planned for May 2013
- Hosting of visit to Melbourne of the then District Administrator of Manatuto Sr Elvino Bonaparte do Rego
- Funding and assistance with establishment of a kindergarten in the village of Obrato including construction of the building, supply of resources, training of teachers and interim payment of teachers' salaries; responsibility for ongoing funding of the kinder including teachers' salaries is currently being transferred to the Timorese Education department.
- hosting of Manatuto community development officer of the District Administration whilst visiting Australia on a Victorian government training programme.

Outlined below are some comments in relation to the inquiry's terms of reference.

This submission has been prepared by Robyn Erwin, President, Friends of Manatuto.

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General

Australia's relationship with Timor Leste is unique and special for a number of reasons.

During World War II the Japanese army followed Australian troops into East Timor – a country which had remained neutral due to its status as a Portuguese colony. Nevertheless the people of East Timor chose to work with and protect Australian troops resulting in only around 40 Australian casualties. When Australian troops left Timor, the Japanese army remained behind resulting in the deaths of many thousands of Timorese. So grateful were the Australians for the assistance of the Timorese that they dropped leaflets over Dili stating that Australia would never forget their friends.

For many years Australia did forget the Timorese. Perhaps this inquiry provides an opportunity to officially acknowledge our gratitude.

As Australia's nearest neighbour further links have grown. During the time of occupation of East Timor by Indonesia many Timorese were accepted into and settled in Australia. These people have become part of Australia's multi-cultural society. Several former refugees have chosen to return to their now independent country and help with its reconstruction. They take with them many skills they have gained from their time in Australia as well as maintaining many personal links and friendships. Many young Timorese have been fortunate to come to Australia to further their studies, and then return to Timor to apply their new knowledge and skills. All this has led to strong personal ties between our two countries.

Since independence of Timor Leste, Australian governments, armed forces and general society have taken on roles of assisting Timor Leste to establish a sustainable society and country. The Friends of Manatuto welcome this review as an opportunity to ensure that the relationship between the two countries continues to prosper.

Bilateral Relations at the Parliamentary and Government Levels

1. The Australian Parliament should officially recognise and thank the people of Timor Leste for their support for Australian military forces in World War II and for the sacrifices made by the people of Timor Leste.
2. The Australian Government should negotiate in good faith and under the terms of the UNCLOS with the Government of Timor-Leste over any future discussion over the sea boundary between the two countries. Any such negotiation should remain quarantined from the wider bilateral relationship between the two countries.

Aid, Including Support with Governance Issues

3. The Australian government should commit to continuing the current levels and extent of its aid program to Timor-Leste.
4. Aid projects in Timor are most successful when based on needs as assessed by the local Timorese community. Projects need to be managed and implemented by the local community or local Timorese organisations, if necessary with support and providing education that enables local management and on-going sustainability.
5. We believe that building human resource capacity and growing the local economy is of prime importance. This needs to be coupled with ensuring infrastructure is in place to enable participation in trade.
6. The Australia – Timor Leste Friendship Group program has enabled development of unique and special relationships between communities in the two countries. Most projects undertaken by Friendship groups are small and specific and address particular needs identified by the local Timorese community. These small projects are essential to the overall development of the country. It is important that the Australian Government is aware of these Friendship relationships when planning and implementing aid projects so that local knowledge is able to be shared and that if and where appropriate collaboration between Friendship groups and Australian government aid projects can occur.
7. Friendship groups particularly those associated with local governments in Australia can and have played a crucial role in supporting education of local government officers and officials.

Some local councils have been able to host Timorese in a working environment and thus provide exposure to office systems, administration and accountability practices. The Australian government should support on-going involvement of local governments and Friendship groups in educating Timorese government officers at all levels.

Economic issues, including trade and investment

8. The Australian government should actively encourage and support Australian businesses to invest in Timor-Leste, especially in employment creation industries such as agriculture and tourism.

Cultural, educational and scientific relations and exchanges

9. The Timorese are in need of skills to increase production capacity of their farmland and improve land management techniques. A well planned and managed seasonal workers programme that includes an exchange of labour for skills over a long period of time would allow skills to be embedded, a range of problems faced and resolved and for Timorese to return and apply skills in Timor Leste.
10. Training programmes and exchanges in other areas including business, education and tourism would enable Timorese to be exposed to ideas and systems that do not exist in Timor. Support networks should be established between Timor Leste and Australia and within Timor Leste to strengthen and enable the application of skills gained and subsequently strengthen the local economy.
11. Timor Leste is our closest neighbour and has a rich and varied culture. The Australian people are interested in learning about cultures of our neighbours. Enabling exposure of Timor culture through schools and events will strengthen relationship between the two countries and encourage businesses and individuals to support skills exchanges and trade.

People to people links

12. The Australian government should actively encourage and support community to community relations between Australia and Timor-Leste through Friendship groups, service organisations (e.g. Rotary), church groups, educational/school tours and other people to people relations.

Defence cooperation and those aspects of regional security that affect Timor-Leste