



COVID-19 and Timor-Leste's readiness to fight

By Angelo M. G. Aparicio and Michael Rose

Just a few weeks ago, Timor-Leste was one of the very few countries which had not registered any cases of COVID-19. However, on 21 March this changed with a [positive diagnosis](#) of an unknown member of the public. The news sent people, especially in Dili, into panic mode. Some people started to flock to grocery stores in Dili and began panic-buying. Fortunately, the panic appears to have been concentrated in a few large shops (and on social media) and hasn't spread to street-side vendors, marketplaces or the villages.

Neither panic nor complacency are useful responses here. That, at the time of writing, we still haven't had another positive diagnosis is a sign for hope. Given our current understanding of how easily the virus can spread and how easily an already fragile health system could be overwhelmed, calm action is needed to prevent the number of cases increasing. Initial studies seem to [suggest](#) that tropical conditions may slow the virus down, and are a cause for cautious hope we might be spared the worst. The terrifying situation developing in [Indonesia](#) is a stark warning we might not be. We must be prepared.

COVID-19 is still not widely understood by the community here. Many people both in and outside of Dili appear to have limited information regarding how dangerous this pandemic is. The situation in local neighbourhoods and markets has not changed much. In neighbourhoods around Dili, many people are still hanging out in big groups. If this is what we're seeing in Dili, we can be pretty certain the message isn't getting through to the villages at all.

The government has chosen to use Dili's Vera Cruz Clinic as the COVID-19 treatment centre and various hotels and residential compounds as quarantine centres. However, people are not well informed about what exactly these facilities are for, and the result has been confusion. Communities in the areas near the quarantine centres protested against their set-up and some community members even threw rocks at one of the quarantine sites. People were scared that they might get the virus just by being close to the centres. It is apparent that many people still have no clue what social distancing entails or what quarantine and self-isolation mean and why they're important, all factors that can be directly attributed to our (so far) poorly managed attempts to get the information out there. Our preparedness is weeks behind the rest of the world and that is dangerous.

That said, we now seem to be making progress. On 26 March, a state of emergency was declared. Foreigners from COVID-19 affected countries are now banned from entering the country, returning Timorese are being placed in

quarantine, and people are being encouraged (although with questionable efficacy) to minimise travel within the country and avoid gathering in public places.

The Ministry of Health, with the support of the World Health Organization, has also recommended preventive measures each citizen should take to fight the virus. The messages that will now be familiar to readers - wash your hands regularly, do not touch your face, maintain social distance and avoid crowded places - are being passed on. However are they doable? For many people they may not be, not only due to a lack of information but also a lack of means. Most people live in small houses with large families. They often have limited access to fresh water and many people rely on communal water taps. People need to gather firewood for cooking and work with others to tend their gardens. Even in the city most need to go out and interact with others (for example, vendors, construction workers, small business owners, and their staff) on daily business. Close human interaction is unavoidable.

These conditions really concern me because this makes it so easy for the virus to spread. Practising social distancing, storing large amounts of food and working from home are privileges only a few can afford. The state of emergency notwithstanding, the government is still doing little to support people. How could it do better? In order to guarantee that people are staying at home and practising the preventive measures recommended, the government needs to prioritise making sure water and electricity are reliable and free for this exceptional period. It needs to find a way to get cash to small business owners, vendors, and daily-wage workers in self-isolation in order for them to sustain their lives. And telecommunication companies should be paid to provide free internet access and calls in order to facilitate communication and avoid people having to go out and buy phone/data credit. If nothing else, food needs to be delivered to people's houses. At this time, we really expect our government to put our safety, health and security before any other issue.

The government also needs to seek support. So far, we have established a single laboratory to test for COVID-19. This is an achievement, but do we have enough test kits to cope with a major surge in cases? Clearly external support from all sources should be actively pursued and welcomed.

Despite some positive measures, the Timor-Leste government needs to prepare for the worst, and its needs to seek support from partners. We need to prepare for a lockdown of the country and the possibility of a rapid increase in confirmed cases that will need intensive treatment.

I would like to believe we Timorese are resilient. History and foreign occupations have taught us what it is like to fight for our lives. We have learnt to survive with limited food, and to isolate ourselves from danger (the Indonesian military who tried to kill us) and not have contact with people outside of our vicinity. Although COVID-19 is a different case, I want to end this article by saying that we are trained for this and we will get through this together. This could be a great opportunity for this country to again reunite. We can beat this invisible enemy if everyone, especially our politicians and leaders, works together. *Hamutuk Ita Bele!* (Together we can!)

A note on the feature image: The Movimentu Tasi Moos (Clean Seas Movement) is a group of activist youth who formed to protect Timor-Leste's marine environment, in particular by cleaning up beaches near Dili. In this crisis they have taken it upon themselves to disinfect public places. (Photo credit: Antoninho Bernadino/Ekipa Movimentu Tasi Moos)

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and the Pacific](#) series.

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