

# East Timor can't PALM all the blame off on Australia

by Richard Curtain

4 June 2026



Timor-Leste President Jose Ramos Horta welcomes Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to Dili, 2026

*Photo Credit: X/JoseRamosHorta1*

Jose Ramos-Horta, the [president of Timor-Leste](#), for his own political purposes, last week again criticised the [Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme](#). He has directed harsh words at the Australian government but has not acknowledged how his own country's government might be at fault as well.

In my research into the seasonal worker program over more than a decade, I have become only too aware of its complexity. The starting point for any analysis is to recognise that the PALM scheme is not an aid program, where the donor through a managing contractor micromanages the program's inputs and outputs. In contrast, the employers, both growers and labour hire firms, are in the driving seat in a real sense. They individually are the source of the demand for workers. Employers want and need to have the final say on who is employed.

How workers are vetted, selected and recruited is a key element of the formal bilateral agreement between two sovereign countries. This agreement is backed up in Australia's case by an [approved employer Deed of Agreement and a detailed set of guidelines](#). The latter have gone through 11 revisions since 26 June 2023, and now number 166 pages. These revisions have made the PALM scheme increasingly more regulated and inflexible in how it operates, especially for employers in agriculture.

Since June 2023, the number of short-term PALM workers in agriculture has fallen from 19,370 to 14,990 in March 2026. This is a loss of 4,380 workers, or 23%.

In addition, regular reports of worker difficulties have been prominent in the media, especially the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#), [SBS News](#) and [The Guardian](#). This reporting is almost always one-sided, with employers not canvassed for their understanding of the situation. The result is a low-trust environment for the employers, labour hire firms and at least some of the workers.

From the beginning of the seasonal worker program, employers developed their

own informal system to introduce a higher level of trust into how workers are selected and assessed. This high-trust system involves employers relying on return workers each year. These workers are invited to return because they are more productive and are happy with the work and living arrangements.

However, the Timorese government has built its own instability into the PALM program in three ways. First, this is done by controlling who is selected for a shortlist presented to an employer. The labour department insists employers select all new workers from the department's own labour pool. This forces employers to take another round of untested new workers with the lack of skills and understanding of what to expect that they bring with them. Requiring the employer to use the department's own shortlist also creates a high risk of corruption in the form of staff demanding payment. This was confirmed by an [ABC video media report in April 2026](#), in which the head of the labour department acknowledged that a member of his staff had demanded and received a bribe.

The second source of instability is that the Timorese labour department has posted two Timorese civil servants to Darwin to be country liaison officers. These officials are not only in a location where there are few Timorese workers (in March 2026 there were 20 in the Northern Territory out of a total of 5,115 Timorese PALM workers in Australia). These civil servants are from Dili and therefore have little understanding of Australian society. The feedback from various sources is that they are missing in action. In contrast, other sending countries such as Fiji have country liaison officers from their diaspora who are Australian residents. They reside in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Guildford, NSW. This means they are located within a reasonable travelling time to where their countries' workers are.

The third source of instability generated by the Timorese government is the pressure on the embassy, and the ambassador in particular, to fill the gap. This requires that the ambassador spend her valuable time visiting workers in remote locations and reporting back to meetings with government agencies in Canberra. The problems identified are not addressed at the workplace but become the basis for formal complaints at a high diplomatic level.

In addition to resolving problems at workplace level, meetings at bilateral government-to-government level are also needed. A mechanism is required to note problems which go beyond a specific workplace. Its task should be to devise solutions, trial them, report back and, where successful, scale up. The existing officials are not suited to do this, as they are too limited by what they perceive to be their mandates. This applies to both the [Department of Employment and Workplace Relations](#) and the embassies and high commissions of the sending countries.

## DEVPOLICYBLOG

What is needed are high-level (that is, ministerial) bilateral discussions held on a regular basis (say every six months) between an Australian government minister or parliamentary secretary with each of the four major sending countries. These discussions should also include other key players, especially employer and labour hire representatives. These meetings need to be organised so that they are problem-solving exercises, accountable to senior government ministers.

*This is a lightly edited version of an article [first published](#) in The Australian.*

*Read the author's [recent journal article](#) "Australia's Seasonal Worker Program: Working Out Ways to Manage Risk".*

### **Author/s:**

#### **Richard Curtain**

Dr Richard Curtain is a research associate, and a former research fellow, with the Development Policy Centre. He is an expert on Pacific labour markets and migration.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/east-timor-cant-palm-all-the-blame-off-on-australia-20260604/>