

Timor-Leste and COVID-19: we will find a way through

by José Ramos-Horta

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Timorese police disinfect cars in Dili (Credit: José Ramos-Horta/Facebook)

As a man who has lived his life for Timor-Leste I, like all of my compatriots, am no stranger to seemingly overwhelming challenges. Perhaps more than if I had led an easier life, I am aware of both the resilience my people can show, and the importance of leadership that is able to act with intelligence, vision, courage and audacity at times like these. Although we have so far avoided large numbers of people falling ill to COVID-19 in Timor-Leste, the economic and psychological impacts of the pandemic are already being felt. Our strategy in facing this challenge, which I have already begun advocating for with the national leadership, must revolve around two pillars: addressing the medical/humanitarian aspects of the crisis; and addressing its arguably as serious socio-economic fallout.

Below I set out some initial ideas about what this might look like. But first, consideration needs to be given to the creation of a national emergency fund. This fund should run to the order of US\$2 billion and be used to facilitate programs relating to the prevention of COVID-19, and the care of any who may get the disease. It might also be drawn on to help ameliorate any impact of the global economic downturn that is likely to result from the pandemic. The help of foreign partners or financial institutions would be most welcome here.

Urgent response measures to COVID-19: medical/humanitarian

We have already made some progress in taking steps to prepare ourselves for the worst this crisis might bring to our shores – for example the establishment of quarantine centres for returning citizens, and the construction of testing facilities. However, to minimise and, if possible, avoid a catastrophe with the spread of COVID-19, more must be done.

Below are some measures that should be seriously considered.

- Provide (or at least plan to provide if it is needed) food, money, and on-site medical care to essential social institutions that cannot be closed. These include

orphanages, boarding schools, and homes for children, young people, women and victims of domestic violence. There needs to be good cooperation between the state and the religious and lay orders that often provide these services.

- Ensure that the armed forces are dispersed from their headquarters in Dili throughout the country to limit the spread of the disease within their ranks and ensure they are fit and ready to assist in any way they are needed.
- Consider the immediate release of prisoners who have already served one-third of their sentences and don't pose a risk to the community.
- Facilitate the free distribution of hygiene products (especially masks, soap, gloves and handwashing equipment) to the population.

Urgent response measures to COVID-19: economic and social

Further to my suggestions relating to the medical/humanitarian aspects of the crisis, below are some ideas as to how we might address its economic and social impact.

- Give support to primary industries, in particular subsistence agriculture and the production of export products such as coffee and vanilla. There is the potential for this to be done through the banking system, in particular BNCTL and BNU and micro-credit institutions such as Moris Rasik. It will also be necessary to support Timorese-owned hotels, trading houses and transportation businesses – all of which will also be particularly vulnerable to this crisis. For example, to ensure the movement of goods continues, we could provide fuel subsidies for trucks transporting goods to and from Dili. In order to help our tourist industry ride out this storm, hotels could be propped up with money equivalent to 50% of what they would take if fully occupied through the duration of the crisis.
- Support private sector employees who have lost their wages, and freeze the collection of rents for state buildings used by the private sector. Subsidise individuals and businesses that rent privately and are suffering COVID-19 related rental stress.
- Expedite the unloading of goods and customs clearance. This may be necessary for getting essential medical equipment into the country.
- The banking sector could temporarily freeze interest on loans, restructure outstanding debts and continue to bring its practices into line with those prevailing throughout the region. Debt forgiveness should be seriously considered.
- Suspend international travel by members of the government, state officials, members of the Defence and Security forces until December 2020.
- Provide health professionals as well as support staff (such as cleaning and garbage collection personnel) with a cash payment equivalent to 50% of their monthly, net, retroactive salary from January to December 2020. This could be extended to the end of 2021. These benefits could also be extended to Cuban doctors and technicians and other international health workers. Essential staff

working in water, sanitation and the emergency services should also receive it.

- In case of a disruption to global food markets the government should seek to acquire and store a stockpile of staple foods to last at least 180 days.
- Direct transfer, for each Timorese family, of a monthly cash payment sufficient to cover basic nutrition.
- Government leaders and public figures, from the president down, should set an example by taking a 50% pay cut until the end of 2022. This initiative would be extended to all international advisers, as well as hired employees. Likewise, the government must institute greater discipline and control over the use of official vehicles and fuel.

Although the situation is daunting, fortunately Timor-Leste is blessed with three relative advantages. First, we find ourselves in a situation in which this pandemic can still be contained; so far we have just one confirmed case. Second, we can learn from the experiences of other countries already affected by the presence of COVID-19, both from the mistakes made by them, and from the measures that have proved to be positive and effective. Third, through our sovereign wealth fund we have financial liquidity which we can deploy to face this crisis quickly and effectively.

For Timor-Leste, like every other nation, these are challenging days. We have no time to waste in taking action to position ourselves to come through them in the best shape possible. Despite all the challenges that lie ahead my people are survivors. Together we will find a way through.

*This blog extends upon the ideas first set out in a [Facebook post](#) and later republished as an [opinion piece](#) in *The Oekusi Post*.*

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

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