

Timor-Leste

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Known as "Asia's newest nation"¹ and the "first new sovereign state of the 21st century,"² the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (East Timor) is a small nation with a complex history and, according to Adventist leaders there, huge potential.³

Overview of the Country—Territory and Statistics

Timor-Leste, also known as East Timor, occupies half of Timor Island and is located 700 kilometers northwest of Darwin, Australia.⁴ The western half of the island is known as Timor, or Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara province. Timor-Leste also includes the islands of Jaco and Atauro (Kambing), as well as the Oecusse (Ambeno) enclave.⁵ It is bordered to the west by Indonesia, north by the Wetair Strait, and southeast by the Timor Sea.⁶ It is the only country in Asia that is completely in the southern hemisphere.⁷

On average the climate is tropical with only two seasons, rainy from December through April and dry from May through November.⁸ The terrain is mountainous with Foho Tatamailau (Mount Ramelau) as its highest point at 2,963 meters (9,721 ft) above sea level.⁹ In terms of natural resources, sandalwood was so prolific¹⁰ that it became a sought-after export from, some say, as early as the seventh century;¹¹ while no longer the primary export, it remains among the current exports.¹² Presently, Timor-Leste has a limited range of exported natural resources with oil and gas comprising 90 percent of its exports.¹³

Dili, the capital of the country, is the nation's largest city. As of July 2021, the population was approximately 1,410,000,¹⁴ with the majority residing in rural areas.¹⁵ Timor-Leste's poverty rate is the highest in Southeast Asia.¹⁶ It also has the highest mortality rates for mothers and for children under five in Southeast Asia.¹⁷

The official languages are Tetun-Dili, or Tetum (local) and Portuguese (colonial), with English and Bahasa (Indonesian) as working languages.¹⁸ There are also at least 15 recognized indigenous languages.¹⁹

Historical Overview

Timor-Leste has endured centuries of colonization and conflict that continue to impact the nation. In the early 1500s the Portuguese brought colonization and Catholicism, while seeking Timor-Leste's sandalwood and spices.²⁰ In the late 1500s the Dutch sought to colonize the western part of Timor Island; this led to continued conflict over which nation had jurisdiction.²¹ This ended via the Treaty of Lisbon in 1859, which gave the western side of Timor Island (except the Oecussi enclave) to the Dutch and the rest of the island to Portugal.²²

This distribution was maintained until World War II. By 1935 Portuguese Timor became the focus of Japan as observed by other nations. Australian news reported that "in Portuguese Timor, right at Australia's front door, Japanese agents are reported to be active, and offers have been made to the Portuguese government for purchase."²³ This was reportedly refused, but Portuguese Timor remained of interest as a strategic base for Japan.

This interest intensified when Allied forces from Australia landed in the Dutch territory of West Timor approximately five days after the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor.²⁴ Dutch forces joined the Australian ones in the territory. However, Portugal claimed neutrality, so the Japanese forces initially only focused on West Timor.²⁵

This was challenged when an Australian military contingent landed in East Timor on December 17, 1941.²⁶ After bombing Darwin on February 19, Japanese forces invaded West Timor on February 20, 1942.²⁷ Known as the Battle of Timor, the Japanese forces overcame the Allied ones in West Timor on February 23, 1942.²⁸ The Japanese forces claimed East Timor as well and occupied both parts of the island until September 11, 1945, when the Japanese surrendered both West and East Timor.²⁹

At that time Indonesia became an independent nation,³⁰ while Portugal resumed its control of East Timor until 1974.³¹ The 1974 so-called Carnation Revolution in Lisbon opened the way for East Timor independence.³² As a result the Timorese government proclaimed the nation to be the Democratic Republic of East Timor on November 28, 1975.³³

After only nine days of independence,³⁴ the Indonesian military forces invaded East Timor on December 7, 1975³⁵ and launched a war that would last more than 25 years and include internment camps and retaliating guerilla warfare. An estimated 100,000 to 200,000 Timorese were killed during this time, with approximately 300,000 displaced or being relocated to internment camps.^{36 37}

The end of the war seemed to begin when there was a change in the Indonesian government leadership in 1998.³⁸ In May 1999 Portugal and Indonesia agreed to allow East Timor to vote on its independence and thus, on August 30, 1999, 78 percent of Timorese voted for independence.³⁹ Militia members against independence and members of the Indonesian military responded with widespread violence, burning and destroying 80 percent of the buildings in the capital of Dili⁴⁰ and killing approximately 1,000 people.⁴¹ UN peacekeeping forces were brought in to restore order and maintain peace. They remained until June 2005.⁴²

National leaders faced the challenging prospect of needing to rebuild and develop a wide range of infrastructure from roads to institutions.⁴³ Although there are continuing issues in these areas, as well as the economy⁴⁴ and private enterprise,⁴⁵ progress has been made. A recent opportunity is in tourism, particularly faith-based tourism,⁴⁶ as well as a heavy emphasis on Timor-Leste’s thriving marine environment.^{47 48}

While Timor-Leste admirably navigated the initial COVID-19 pandemic in 2020,⁴⁹ the 2021 COVID-19 outbreak and Easter floods severely impacted Timor-Leste.⁵⁰ Regardless, it remains a nation of great potential and the Adventist Church recognizes this.

Arrival and Growth of Seventh-day Adventism in the Country

One of the first mentions of Portuguese Timor in an Adventist context occurred in the January 1920 issue of *Asiatic Division Outlook*, the Far Eastern Division (FED)’s church publication. The article lists Portuguese Timor among the populations in its territory.⁵¹

During the April 16-28, 1925, FED Spring Council meetings, the committee recommended that the FED officers study the unentered regions of FED territory.⁵² Portuguese Timor was again one of those identified by FED.⁵³

As part of the February 19-29, 1928, annual meetings of the FED Executive Committee in Shanghai, China, the committee voted to establish the Netherlands East Indies Union (NEIU) with Portuguese Timor⁵⁴ as part of the East Java Mission.⁵⁵

However, NEIU was not long part of the FED. Unexpectedly, at the September 25, 1928, Autumn Council, the General Conference approved the Central European Division’s (CED) request to transfer the Netherlands East Indies Union from the FED to CED.⁵⁶ After World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, Germany lost all its colonies so it had nowhere to send willing missionaries, and the only money that could be sent out of Germany had to be used for mission work. Thus, CED felt it could provide missionaries and finances to grow the work in NEIU. Arabia and Egypt were also transferred to CED in that action.

On December 10, 1928, the FED Executive Committee noted the action and voted its approval, with regret, during a meeting in Shanghai.⁵⁷ On February 5, 1929, the Malaysian Union Mission likewise followed suit during its biennial meeting.⁵⁸

During the reorganization, the Ambon Mission was established as part of the NEIU and included Timor.⁵⁹ The headquarters was in Ambon.

According to later reports, it was around this time that a few local literature evangelists entered the western part of Timor Island and successfully sold literature.⁶⁰ It was later reported that an Australian literature evangelist arrived in Nusa Tenggara and briefly sold Adventist literature. Reportedly, there was no follow-up after his departure.

Approximately five years later, Germany could no longer support mission work due to the pre-World War II political situation in the country. Thus, NEIU was reorganized at the October 1937 General Conference Autumn Council and returned to FED effective January 1, 1938.⁶¹ During the January 24-February 2, 1938, FED Year-end Council, the committee recommendations for the General Conference included Portuguese Timor as part of NEIU.⁶²

Loth Sine of Timor Koepang (now Kupang in West Timor) requested a gospel worker for Koepang in 1946, but there were none available at that time.⁶³

In 1947 a literature evangelist named Brother Francis was sent to Timor Koepang as a pioneer worker for the Indonesia Union Mission. However, he became ill and passed away before establishing any solid inroads.⁶⁴

By 1948 Portuguese Timor was part of the South Celebes Mission (SCM), along with Timor Koepang, in what was then the Indonesia Union Mission (IUM) territory.⁶⁵ In April 1950 Brother Legoh, another literature evangelist, was sent by SCM to pioneer work in Timor Koepang.⁶⁶ He organized a Sabbath School and, by July, he was hosting a month of evening evangelistic meetings led by SCM president, A. Pasuhuk.⁶⁷

Despite the challenges of World War II and the years of rebuilding afterward, Adventist membership in the area increased to 200. Workers such as Brother Malonda and Brother Lombadgia had helped in this growth. However, more administrative structure was needed as the work progressed.

Java, Timor Island, and Roti were made a detached IUM territory during the February 7-15, 1955, annual executive committee meeting of IUM in Bandung, Indonesia.⁶⁸ The territory's future status would be determined at the 1956 IUM biennial session. There the committee voted Elder K. Mandias, formerly president of South Sumatra Mission and Northern Celebes Mission,⁶⁹ as the detached territory's leader.⁷⁰ The committee also voted that Malonda would be retained to assist Mandias while Lombadgia was reassigned back to the South Celebes Mission.⁷¹

In 1955 Timor Mission, containing Indonesian Timor (West) and Portuguese Timor (East) as well as the island of Roti, was established, but not yet organized, with two churches and 100 members.⁷² During the January 23-30, 1956, IUM biennial session, the detached territory was organized as the Nusa Tenggara Mission.⁷³ It included Timor, as well as the "other islands east of Java, namely Bali, Lombok, Surnbawa, Sumba, Timor, Roti, and...the Lesser Sunda Islands."⁷⁴ Kupang, Timor, would be the home of the mission headquarters and a new church.⁷⁵

Nine years later, in 1964, IUM was divided into two new unions: East Indonesia Union Mission (EIUM) and West Indonesia Union Mission (WIUM).⁷⁶ The Nusa Tenggara Mission thus became part of WIUM at that time, with Portuguese Timor still unentered.

At the 1973 FED Annual Council in Manila, a Mission Advance Reserve Fund was established; and a recommendation was made that WIUM conduct a survey to determine whether to send a literature evangelist-and-wife team to Portuguese Timor.⁷⁷

WIUM and FED had long planned to initiate work in Portuguese Timor. Me He Wauran, the WIUM publishing director, and W. L. Wilcox, the Southeast Asia Union Mission evangelist, were tasked with surveying the possibility of establishing an Adventist presence in this Portuguese colony.⁷⁸ At the time it was one of the last two areas in FED with no “organized Adventist work.”⁷⁹

During the November 7-19, 1974, FED yearend council meetings, calls were issued for a Portuguese-speaking family and a student missionary from Brazil to pioneer Adventist work in Portuguese Timor.⁸⁰ This was the first time FED had requested a South American student missionary.⁸¹

Pioneers

In terms of pioneers entering specifically into Portuguese Timor, this did not happen in an official way until 1975 in the form of A. C. Barlow, an Australian literature evangelist whose war-interrupted experience is further detailed in the next section.

Between 1976 and 1980, eight Indonesian Adventist civil workers and two Indonesian literature evangelists entered Portuguese Timor and comprised the first long-term Adventist presence. Paulus Kapitan notably held the first Sabbath programs in Dili, helped the church grow, and sponsored Adventist education in Indonesia for Timorese youth, a number of which returned to become Adventist leaders in today's Timor-Leste.

The first Timorese pioneers were the Frans Da Costa Cabral Lai family and the family of Inaciu da Kosta, one of the Timorese young people who had been sponsored by Kapitan.

Spread and Development of the Message

In 1975 FED announced that A. C. Barlow, a Darwin, Australia, literature evangelist, and his family would pioneer the Adventist work in Portuguese Timor that year.⁸² Barlow would first work with the very small English-speaking population until his language skills enabled him to freely engage the Portuguese community.⁸³ The long-term goal was to start a school.

Barlow, the first full-time worker, arrived on June 27, 1975.⁸⁴ He was forced to leave 54 days later due to the outbreak of what was to become East Timor's decades-long struggle for independence.⁸⁵ Despite his short stay, the Adventist world Church now included the country among its entered countries.⁸⁶

Leaders in the WIUM and FED didn't give up the goal of returning to Timor. The June 17, 1976, minutes document the WIUM executive committee's vote “to request Elder Me He Wauran to investigate the possibilities of ordering books and arranging Literature Evangelists to enter East Timor as soon as it is opened.”⁸⁷

During the war years, WIUM encouraged the Adventist school in Indonesia to financially assist students from East Timor who would not otherwise be able to attend, considering the East Timor situation.⁸⁸

Between 1976 and 1980, Adventists came to East Timor as government workers and added an Adventist presence.⁸⁹ They included: Kel. Yonathan Balemangi, Ruben Buli, Kel. Paulus Kapitan, Markus Lay, Musa (Moses) Ludji Leo, Yusuf (Joseph) Nenobais, Bidan Nurasih, and Dr. Zeth Lenggu. Lay, Lekidadila, Leo, and Nenobais eventually returned to Kupanag, while the rest remained in Dili.⁹⁰

After receiving the long-awaited permission from the Indonesian government, WIUM sent workers to areas near the East Timor border in Kefamenanu (15 kilometers from Oekusi) and Atambua (12 kilometers from Maliana).⁹¹ In June 1980 two literature evangelists arrived in East Timor and successfully sold literature.⁹² This marked the official reentry of Adventist work in East Timor. One of the literature evangelists, Stepanus Bengngu, remained as the official Adventist worker there.⁹³

On September 25, 1980, WIUM requested FED to provide funding for the new work in the East Timor capital of Dili.⁹⁴ During the same executive committee meeting, WIUM also voted to request financial assistance from FED for a land and housing purchase in Dili; this would serve both as housing for a worker and as a temporary church building.⁹⁵

In 1986 Kapitan was an Adventist policeman in East Timor. He obtained permission from the regional chief of police in East Timor to hold a Sabbath worship program in the Comoro police dormitory. In February 1986 Kapitan became the police chief of Oesilo, Oekusi. Thus, Bangngu became the next leader of the Sabbath worship that had moved to the home of Kel. Yonathan Balemangi, who lived in the same area of the Comoro Police barracks as Kapitan had.

Meanwhile, Kapitan joined the Sabbath worshippers in Kefamananu, Kecamatan, West Timor, Indonesia, most likely because there was no Adventist group in Oesilo. Pastor Samuel Rakmeni was the pastor of the Kefamanau group. Kapitan shared the evangelistic activities going on in Dili and asked Rakmeni if he would consider pastoring the group there. Rakmeni was interested, but he suggested Kapitan make a formal request to the Nusa Tenggara Mission.

Kapitan met with Pastor Martaatmaja, the Nusa Tenggara Mission (NTM) president, in Kupang and requested that Rakmeni be allowed to pastor the group in Dili. Pastor Martaatmaja approved the request and in November 1986, Kapitan made the arrangements for Rakmeni's clearance to travel to and live in Dili.

On November 28, 1986, Pastor Martaatmaja flew to Dili and the next day organized the group of eight into what today would be called a company. The location was Rumah Sakit Wirahusada, a hospital, with Dr. Zeth Lenggu at the leader. The founding membership included literature evangelist and church chairman Bengngu; church secretary, Ibu Agus Balemangi; church treasurer, Bidan Nurasih; and members Yonathan Balemangi, Ruben Buli, Lenggum, Paulus Kapitan, and W. S. Kapitan.⁹⁶

On December 1, 1986, Paulus Kapitan and Rakmeni took the bus from "Atambua Balibo to Dili through Nunura Maliana, crossing the flooded river, and through the Kailaku floods."⁹⁷ They arrived in Dili four days later.

Sadly, Rakmeni only served as pastor for one year. In 1987 Martaatmaja and a group from Nusa Tenggara Mission drove Rakmeni's family to Dili to live with him at KasRem 161 Wira Darma Letkol Lakuza. However, when they reported to the local military official tasked with city defense, irregularities in Ramkeni's paperwork were discovered. There were two listings for his profession, neither of which were accurate, and thus the Rakmeni family had two days in which to leave or be imprisoned by order of the military.⁹⁸

It was two years before the next pastor was assigned to the church in Dili. Frans Da Costa Cabral Lai, a theology major at UNAI, and his family returned to Dili in 1989 after he was unable to finish his degree. Bengngu and Paulus Kapitan asked Lai to serve as the Dili pastor and lead in evangelism. He requested that they get permission from the NTM, so Paulus Kapitan went to NTM and asked Pastor Martaatmaja. In December 1989 the NTM executive committee voted that Lai would receive training in Kupang and begin pastoral service in Dili in March 1990.⁹⁹ The church services were moved so that the family could use the house that had been used for a church. Lai served as the church pastor until December 1990.¹⁰⁰

Property for a church building had been purchased close to the Santa Cruz Cemetery, where the Indonesian military's massacre of 271 Timorese occurred on November 12, 1991.¹⁰¹ However, the Indonesian government chose to put a road where the new church was to be built, so the government took the property and a new location was needed.¹⁰²

The next church pastor was D. D. Pa who also served there for one year as part of NTM. In early 1992, the property on Manleuana Street in Dili was purchased and a church was built there. A sponsor named Frans Londa was instrumental in this.

Also, during this time, Paulus Kapitan wanted to help Timorese young people obtain an Adventist education and then return to help grow the Church.¹⁰³ So in 1992, he sent the first one, a youth from Lospalos named Inaciu da Kosta, to Sekolah Lanjutan Advent Nusra Noelbaki (now Nusa Tenggara Academy) in Kupang.¹⁰⁴ Over the next three years, he sent nine other youth from Lospalos. Of the nine, Belnijio Valente Freitas eventually pastored at Nusa Tenggara Academy, Luis da Kosta returned to Lospalos as a local missionary, and Inaciu da Kosta now serves as the Timor-Leste Mission executive secretary.¹⁰⁵

The Dili Seventh-day Adventist Church was inaugurated in early 1993 by Nusa Tenggara Mission president, Alex Hendriks. During this special celebration, Inaciu da Kosta was baptized by Pastor Hendriks and then returned to his studies.¹⁰⁶

In 1993 Pastor Y. Y. Fina replaced Pa who returned to Kupang. Two years later, Pastor Gerungan became the church pastor. In 1998 Pastor Jhony Djahamau served there for one year. In 1999 Pastor Inaciu da Kosta became the church pastor after completing his theological training.¹⁰⁷

During the war there were approximately 98 church members. Only six were Timorese—four members of the Lai family who were among the first Timorese baptized in 1993, Pastor da Kosta, and da Kosta's wife.¹⁰⁸ The final

escalation leading to the August 30, 1999, vote for freedom from Indonesian rule scattered the church.¹⁰⁹ The Lai family later reported there had been fighting and killing right outside their home, so they stayed sheltered inside and prayed.¹¹⁰ Pastor da Kosta and the Lai family worked to reestablish the church, starting with their small group of six people. Ronaldo Custodio L. Pereira, a Brazilian missionary who was an ordained pastor, was sent with his family to help in 2001.¹¹¹

During the February 21, 2005, Southern Asia-Pacific Division Executive Committee meeting, the committee approved the administrative committee's recommendation to establish an East Timor Oversight Committee. This committee was to oversee the development of the work there.¹¹²

The Adventist work in Timor-Leste was officially organized in 2009 as the East Timor Attached Field (ETAF) under the auspices of SSD.¹¹³ It had one church with a membership of 306.¹¹⁴ Pastor Custodio L. Pereira became ETAF's director, the only one holding a ministerial credential in ETAF at the time. He was a Brazilian missionary and ordained pastor who had been sent with his family in 2001 to help develop the work in the region. Additionally, in 2009, there were two official credentialed missionaries: Wilma Kainde and Hengki Kambey, the latter who also served as the ETAF secretary-treasurer.¹¹⁵

Institutions

The Adventist Church has a small but growing presence in Timor-Leste.

Church/Companies

The Fomento Seventh-day Adventist Church (Igreja Adventista Do Sétimo Dia), located at Do Fomento; Fomento 1; Comoro, Dili; Timor-Leste, is the only Adventist church in the country. It is located on the same property as the Timor-Leste Mission headquarters.

There are two official companies under TLM auspices. They are in Lospalos in the eastern part of the country and Uma Tolu in the southern part of the country.¹¹⁶

Educational Institution

The Timor-Leste Adventist International School (TAIS) is a coeducational elementary and high school operated by TLM. Established in 2015, it is the only Seventh-day Adventist school in the country. Located at 4 de Setembro, Comoro, Dom Aleixio, Dili, Timor-Leste, it is a mission school serving predominately non-Adventist students. TAIS is accredited by the Ministry of Education of East Timor.

Radio Station

Hope Channel Timor-Leste 92.3 FM initially started as Radio Novo Tempo and was relaunched as Hope Channel Timor-Leste in 2013 at the TLM headquarters property.¹¹⁷ Operated by TLM, Hope Channel Timor-Leste 92.3 FM broadcasts Hope Channel programming 18 hours per day in Tetum, Indonesian, Portuguese, and English.¹¹⁸

Community Development and Relief

Since 2010 ADRA Timor-Leste has represented the world Church's faith-based, global humanitarian organization, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), in Timor-Leste.¹¹⁹ ADRA Timor-Leste's staff of 27 coordinate and facilitate a variety of projects in Timor-Leste, including in agriculture, business development, water, hygiene, and nutrition.¹²⁰

Church Administrative Units

The sole church administrative unit in the country is the Timor-Leste Mission (TLM). Formerly known as the East Timor Attached Field (ETAF), TLM is an attached mission of SSD. After its organization in 2009, it was renamed and reorganized in 2011.¹²¹ As of June 30, 2021, TLM had one church with a membership of 700 in a population of 1,322,000.¹²² The TLM headquarters office remains on the former ETAF property at Do Fomento; Fomento 1; Comoro, Dili; Timor-Leste.¹²³

Effect of Political Developments on Adventist Work

The 20 plus years of war in Timor-Leste devastatingly affected Adventist work in the country. For the entirety of the war, official missionaries were not allowed entry. Thankfully, there were small groups of Adventist Indonesians who came as government sector workers to Timor-Leste over the years. In the latter years of the war, Indonesian literature evangelists and Indonesian and Timorese pastors were admitted. Still, the Church's infrastructure in the country was delayed and only since the country's 2002 official independence has the Church been able to grow and stabilize. Adventist leaders in the region feel there is still much to do and develop.

Adventism's Place in the Country

Adventism has begun to find its place in the country. The Church's lone Adventist school in the country, Timor-Leste Adventist International School (TAIS) in Dili, has made tremendous strides in the past six years. Parents of TAIS students have influential roles in the country and some serve in government and military leadership positions. In the capital, Adventists are gaining a positive reputation in the areas of education and for their fledgling community health initiatives. In the rural areas, local medical missionaries and members are bringing health education and assistance to at-risk communities.

Challenges to Mission and What Remains to Be Done

Lack of resources, developing infrastructure, and the impact of COVID-19 are among the current challenges for Adventism in Timor-Leste. In a country ranked ninth among the 13 poorest countries in Asia, Timor-Leste also struggles with a low adult literacy rate.¹²⁴ Thus, the Church faces the twin challenges of financially providing structure and programming that also meets the true needs of those most at-risk among its members and communities.

As for COVID-19's impact, Timor-Leste's challenging telecommunications situation has prevented the Adventist Church from developing and sustaining connections with members and the community in a virtual way during the pandemic and possibly into the future. While Zoom and similar technology enabled Church entities in other parts of Asia and the world to maintain and create new connections via virtual programming, the Adventist Church in Timor-Leste needed to find resourceful alternatives during the almost two years of lockdowns. This has resulted in delays in the Church's goals for programs and initiatives, yet leaders are encouraged by how workers and members have found ways to share and make inroads in their communities.

In terms of the future, the Church in Timor-Leste will continue to strive to meet local church and community needs through its focus on local member leadership nurturing, TAIS expansion, and new development avenues, especially in the areas of health.

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