

PRESS RELEASE

An update from FONGTIL's visits to municipalities near the border between Indonesia and Timor-Leste (Liquiça, Bobonaro and Covalima)

May, 14-18, 2020

We would like to congratulate the people of Timor-Leste and the relevant authorities, as well as the international community, for their great work in the battle against Covid-19. Even though there have been several positive infections of Covid-19 in Timor-Leste, with great commitment and effort from the relevant authorities, evidently the hard work and great effort have brought success by preventing the virus from spreading widely in the local community.

Our observations from our visit to municipalities:

1. Positive

- Everyone we met is worried about the danger to human life posed by the Corona virus, including local authorities, community radio, civil society, PDHJ, security officials and ordinary citizens. They all know about coronavirus and the strong threat it is to people's lives.
- Many efforts are being taken at the municipality level, including hard work by PNTL, doctors, civil society, international agencies and media to establishing facilities and increase public awareness regarding Covid-19. We also observed strong participation from the population living in the border areas between Indonesia and Timor-Leste to help prevent the spread of the virus.
- Coordination teams, led by municipal President and administrator, have been established at the municipal level to strengthen collective prevention measures. Each team includes people who work in government, civil society and international agencies.
- Local officials are effectively socializing information regarding Covid-19 by going to each suku.
- Community radio is socializing information about Covid-19 to the public. People also see television about preventive measures from the Ministry of Health and international agencies.
- The Provedor's office (PDHJ) is working to receive complaints and monitor the situation regarding Covid-19 and the state of emergency.
- To reduce the economic burden on each household during the State of Emergency and Covid19 pandemic, local authorities have compiled lists of households which should get subsidies and provide them to the national government.
- Overcoming many challenges, great efforts were achieved by the local authorities such as PNTL-UPF, FDTL, Immigration. Civil Security and border control personnel.

- International partners provided facilities such as water tanks, buckets and soap for people in the community to wash their hands to help prevent Covid-19.
- Almost everyone who was infected had legally entered Timor-Leste over the border; only a few suspected people entered illegally. All received treatment from the security authorities, going into quarantine and isolation (for those infected), as the most effective way of keeping the virus out of the community.

2. Challenges

- Many people in the community are still not fully aware of the importance of physical distancing, wearing masks, and the importance of washing hands using water and soap. Some only follow the rules because they are afraid of the police, not because they are worried about the coronavirus.
- Local authorities are very concerned about some difficulties, including funding for operational costs, lack of facemasks, lack of water tanks and lack of soap. These challenges make it difficult to organize the population. For example, no officials were stationed in the market to remind people to use masks or maintain physical distancing.
- The security authorities are facing difficulties in accessing funds and facilities to operate.
- People find it difficult to obtain money to repay loans from banks and creditors.
- People living in the Memo-Maliana border area keep trying to cross the border. People on both sides use the same language and share the same culture, however they cannot interact with each other.
- In Maliana, less rainfall this year than usual has reduced rice production; irrigation wasn't working, pests attacked the rice, and many paddies were not planted.
- Some people try to cross the border river to get seeds and other agricultural tools that are hard to obtain in Maliana.
- Many have used facemasks, however due to the lack of knowledge some people didn't change or wash their mask. There are not enough water tanks in public places for people to wash their hands.
- Water tanks and hand washing buckets have been provided by international agencies in markets, however soap is still hard to find.

3. Reasons why people still cross the border

- Many people near the border area have limited access to finance. Many of them took loans from local creditors. However, due to the closing of borders, these people cannot repay their loans on time, because they can no longer buy cheap items from Indonesia. Some have crossed the border to go to markets.
- The border covers a broad area, and there are not enough security personnel to cover the entire area. Therefore, some places -- especially Balibo, Memo, Tutu Bibi, Fatumea and Mota Masin -- are not well-protected and people take the risk of violating the rules to go to Indonesia for pressing needs.

- Some cross the border to visit relatives in West Timor, where many have become sick and died.

4. Opportunities

- As public and official awareness of the dangers of Covid-19 increases, national authorities need to work harder to implement preventive measures and support local authorities' efforts. The increase in the number of infected people in nearby Kupang underscores this urgency.
- Community radio, civil society and international agencies in municipalities need to work together in the struggle against the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Recommendations

- The Crisis Management Office should coordinate better with the local authorities near the border, to share information and enhance border security, protection and preventative measures.
- Provide personal protective equipment for the UPF staff, including masks, gloves, disinfectant, hand sanitizer, lamps, goggles, shoes, CCTV, and other items to help UPF work more effectively.
- Identify immediate basic needs of people living near the border, and provide support to discourage them from crossing the border illegally.
- Continue to share information, especially with the population near the border, to prevent Covid-19 from entering and spreading in the community.
- Identify and analyze the economic situation of businesspeople, including creditors and their clients, to address reasons why they cross the border and gather at markets in West Timor.
- Government could request creditors to understand their borrowers' difficulties in paying on time, and not to punish people for paying late during this crisis. Government should accelerate the credit policy which was promised a few months ago.

Thank you,

Delegation of the Civil Society Team from for the Prevention of the Covid19 Pandemic

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