

Timorese Government worried about management of school projects with Portugal

The Timor-Leste government is concerned about the coordination of the CAFE schools project, the largest Luso-Timorese cooperation, and the delays repeated every year in the arrival of teachers, Lusa sources told Lusa.

LUSA, 9 March 2018 -- According to sources, there are problems with the CAFE (Centers for Learning and School Formation) project that “have been repeatedly raised” by the Timorese authorities with the Portuguese Ministry of Education, “without anything having been corrected.”

“The issues have been discussed on several occasions, both directly with the Ministry and with the Embassy. The problems continue and, surprisingly, and in spite of repeated complaints of problems, nothing has been done at the level of coordination which remains the same, “a leader of the Timorese Ministry of Education told Lusa.

Unclear criteria in teachers’ assessment and decisions on renewal, as well as poor clarity on how they are changed from schools - with “clear impact on pedagogical continuity” - are “some of the problems” detected.

There are also questions about differences in treatment related to financial criteria from center to center and repeated complaints from dozens of teachers who reported being victims of threats and intimidation when they tried to report the problems that affect the project, the same source said.

One of the problems that occurs every year has to do with the delay in the arrival of the teachers, due to the delay in the preparation and signing of the contracts and the problems in the management of teachers who work with a school calendar that in Timor-Leste that is different from the Portuguese calendar. The school year usually begins in mid-January in Timor-Leste.

As an example, Timorese ministerial officials cite the situation this year where teachers returned to Timor-Leste “quite late”, with the first group of about 80 arriving only in early March, more than a month and a half after the beginning of classes. The second group, about 40, only left Portugal on 10 March.

Timorese ministers visited two of the CAFE schools, in Same and Ermera, this week where, two months after the start of the school year, “there are still no Portuguese teachers.”

This year’s situation has become “even more ridiculous,” said a Timorese source, because the coordinators of the project decided to put the teachers in the districts where they were last year, but explaining that in less than a month, at Easter, they would change placements.

“What kind of pedagogical continuity does this guarantee? What impact do these changes have on the students?,” asked a Timorese educational official.

It is not the first time that the project, co-financed by the two countries, has had several problems pointed out, which include long delays in the payment of salary supplements by Timor-Leste.

The Timorese bureaucracy requires, for example, that teachers’ contracts should pay them from the bilateral aid component in Timor-Leste, but the documents take several months to arrive in Lisbon, explained a source from the Timorese Ministry of Education.

Timorese educational officials complain that the evaluations that are made to the project are “partial”, with the evaluators “targeted specific schools and teachers” in order to “conceal the problems”.

They point out, for example, that the central coordination of the project in Dili carried out last year’s evaluation during the most complicated week for the Timorese education system, when the national exams were taking place and many responsible people were busy with this process.

Urged to comment on the issues, Lurdes Bessa, Vice-Minister of Education, declined to comment on specific problems, reiterating only the “commitment and willingness” to “strengthen and expand” this project.

Bessa confirmed that the Government intends to increase the number of CAFE centers and that it remains “committed to ensuring that the project works in the best way possible”.

Currently in the capitals of the 13 Timorese municipalities, involving about 80 trainee teachers from Timor-Leste, 130 Portuguese teachers and more than 7,000 students, the reference schools project (CAFE) is the most important element of the program to support teaching Portuguese in Timor-Leste.