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Viewing cable 07SURABAYA55, EAST NUSA TENGGARA: WEST TIMOR'S PERFECT STORM--REFUGEES,

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 SUBJECT: EAST NUSA TENGGARA: WEST TIMOR'S PERFECT STORM--REFUGEES,
 CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUBSISTENCE FARMING

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This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Surabaya Pol/Econ Officer and Pol/Econ Assistant met with local officials and NGOs involved in the resettlement of refugees from Timor Leste in the cities of Kupang and Atambua, in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) during a October 2-5 visit. After our meetings in Atambua near the border with Timor Leste, we visited the official border crossing at Mota'ain. Violence associated with Timor Leste's independence has abated but continuing food insecurity and local disputes related to refugee relocation and aid threaten to become flashpoints for renewed conflict in NTT. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) NTT is among the poorest of Indonesia's provinces and remains unable to feed its population without outside assistance. The NTT government has requested an additional 58,600 tons of rice from the central government to augment the 1,600 tons now on hand in the province. NTT Vice Governor Frans Leburaya blamed local preference for rice instead of corn and root crops which were staples in the past, according to media reports. NGOs and local officials with whom we met echoed Leburaya's assessment. Rice shortages are endemic to the province due to insufficient, suitable land for rice cultivation.

¶3. (SBU) A vicious cycle of poor soil, slash and burn farming and an unpredictable rainy season have spelled hard times for subsistence farmers. During our visit to several refugee village areas between Kupang and Atambua late in the dry season, we saw little activity apart from the smoke rising on distant hillsides preparing them for expected November rains. While our sources differed on the precise timing, they all agreed that farmers were finding it increasingly harder to predict the arrival and duration of the rainy season beginning in 2000. This challenge to their means of support coincided with the massive inflow of East Timorese refugees.

¶4. (SBU) Casava and corn were staples prior to the encouragement of water-intensive rice cultivation during the Suharto regime. Over the past six years West Timor has experienced particularly unpredictable rains causing farmers to misjudge proper planting times and reducing yields. A representative of Pikul (an Indonesian NGO that helps coordinate cooperation between large foreign assistance organizations and local NGOs) told us that corruption also plays a significant role in NTTs annual food crisis). The Pikul representative said that continued access to significant financial resources to fight malnutrition paradoxically provides NTT provincial

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officials with a disincentive to find a permanent solution.

Refugee Pressures

¶5. (SBU) Over the past seven years an estimated 120-150,000 people have crossed the border from Timor Leste and settled in refugee camps in West Timor. The type and quality of housing provided them is generally limited to rough wooden structures roofed with palm leaves or corrugated tin. The Regent of Belu Joachim Lopez told us that refugees in his border Regency were given the option of repatriation or relocation to another Indonesian province, but most of these "warga baru," or new citizens, chose to be resettled in areas close to the Timor Leste border. Although linguistic, religious and even family ties helped integrate the refugees into West Timor's landscape, scarce farmland and water resources remain a source of friction between the refugees and their new neighbors. Added to this, the influx of foreign aid to the refugee communities living side by side with similarly poor but non-refugee villages has caused resentment and jealousy.

Reconciliation takes Resources

¶6. (SBU) In Kupang, we met with Armindo Mariano, the former Chairman of East Timor Golkar, and Feliz Amaral, of the East Timor Community Council (Makasti). Both men were born in East Timor and opposed independence from Indonesia. Mariano served as part of provincial government while East Timor was part of Indonesia. Both men have immediate family living in Timor Leste and described a strong desire to see the new country succeed

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despite their opposition to its independence. Mariano told us that the UN referendum regarding East Timor independence was simply inaccurate and that reconciliation between the two nations can only occur if Timor Leste and the rest of NTT have economic parity. Feliz Amaral said reconciliation is a precondition for economic development on both sides of the border, rather than a product of it, as Mariano insists.

¶7. (SBU) Amaral told us that the potential for violence still exists between East Timorese in Timor Leste and so-called ex-Timor or refugee returnees. A sign of this latent potential for violence was the continued use of the word "militia" in Timor Leste to describe all pro-integrationists whether or not they ever took up arms. This phenomenon is simply an effect of Timor Leste's leadership keeping a hold on power, said Amaral. Mariano and Amaral expressed the hope that reconciliation would make it possible for those refugees who wish to return to Timor Leste to do so without fear of being called provocateurs.

A Border that Breaks for Lunch

¶8. (SBU) Guided by local NGO worker and native of East Timor, we traveled to the border at Mota'ain along back roads that wound their way through refugee villages within just a mile of the geographic border. The local population, long used to freely visiting family and friends before there was an international border, continues to cross, albeit out of view of the border guards. Several sources told us that East Timor's use of the US dollar has meant high prices relative to Indonesia and the nearby footpaths see their share of smuggling.

¶9. (SBU) At the formal border crossing at Mota'ain, we noticed people clustered atop a yellow line indicating the border itself. One man standing with them explained that the Timor Leste border guards were eating lunch in their guardhouse out of sight and this made it easier for him to meet with relatives and exchange gifts. A new Indonesian market complex within one hundred yards of the border is clearly intended to take advantage of border trade, but has yet to open. Meetings between Indonesian and Timor Leste officials and NGOs will reportedly take place in late October regarding the issuance of border crossing cards to ease travel of both "new citizens" and citizens of Timor Leste.

¶10. (U) Embassy Dili cleared this message.

MCCLELLAND