

Veterans Needs and Risks in the Independent Timor-Leste



In 2002 the Government of Timor-Leste requested donor support to respond to the pressing and potentially destabilizing issue of recognition of veterans of Timor-Leste's resistance struggle. In response, the World Bank, provided a PCF grant of \$500,000 along with additional funds provided by UNDP, USAID, Development Cooperation Ireland, and DFID to help finance the veterans commissions -

Comissão para os Assuntos dos Antigos Combatentes (Commission for Matters of Former Combatants/CAAC) and Comissão para os Assuntos dos Veteranos das Falintil (Commission for Matters of Veterans of Falintil/CAVF) - to register veterans of the armed resistance and move forward with the critical task of developing a veterans policy. The identification and registration of veterans of the resistance has proven to be one of the most important contributions to post-conflict stability in Timor-Leste, helping to foster reconciliation, socio-political cohesion, and a sense of belonging to the new nation-state among potentially disenfranchised veterans and the community as a whole.

Veterans needs and risks

In 1975, rather than becoming an independent state along with Portugal's other colonies, Timor-Leste was invaded by neighboring Indonesia and occupied for 24 years. Over the course of the occupation, thousands of people contributed to the resistance struggle, either as members of Falintil (Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste, Armed Forces of National Liberation of Timor-Leste), the armed wing of the resistance, or as members of the vast civilian network supporting the armed struggle. The first phase of the resistance, from 1975 to 1979, involved thousands of armed combatants. During the second phase, 1981 to 1999, the resistance relied on far fewer soldiers, supported and complemented by civilian activists.

In 1999, Timor-Leste separated from Indonesia in an UN-brokered referendum. In early 2001, the 1,900 active Falintil members either joined the new national defense force or were demobilized under the Falintil Re-insertion Assistance Program (FRAP). While quite successful as a reintegration program, FRAP was not designed to recognize or assist the thousands of veterans who had served the struggle during earlier eras.

In the months surrounding independence that took place in May 2002, community tensions arose surrounding activities by groups purporting to represent veteran's interests, which demanded recognition and assistance from the new state. The need to honor, and where possible, assist veterans of the resistance was broadly recognized and enshrined in Article 11 of the country's Constitution. However, there was also growing concern that disenchantment among veterans constituted a challenge to stability and made them susceptible to political manipulation. The first step in allaying these tensions was to develop a list of legitimate veterans and recommendations for development of a national policy on veterans. Recognizing the potentially destabilizing effect of the growing tensions, the President appointed the two veterans commissions to register veterans of the armed resistance in September 2002.

Engaging with the veterans: identification and registration

The veterans commissions were charged with establishing a definition and classifications, compiling a list of veterans, and formulating policy recommendations on how best to address veterans needs. The veterans commissions included 20 national commissioners, supported by 13 technical staff. Over 300 district and sub-district level staff were employed for various phases of the process. The key to the success of the veterans commissions was creating a process that was publicly legitimate, and produced a credible list. The commissions achieved this through extensive community involvement in each phase of the process, which included initial registration; posting of provisional lists and acceptance of corrections and claims; and public consultations on policy recommendations. In addition to registering living veterans, families registered deceased veterans. Following registration, all names were entered into a database. By posting the lists in communities following the registration, the commissions allowed for public comment and new registrations. Following the posting of the lists, several thousand more people came forward to register.

The commissions were successful both in mitigating the community tensions surrounding veterans issues and laying the basis for a national policy on veterans. Community leaders report that agitation by those purporting to represent veterans interests, and the community tensions surrounding this agitation, largely dissipated once the State was seen to be addressing the issue.

Reaching a consensus

One of the most successful aspects of the veterans commissions process was a series of public consultations held in February 2004 in 24 different locations around the country, with approximately 8,000 people participating nationwide. Participation in the consultations was extremely enthusiastic as it afforded people an opportunity to express their opinions on veterans issues and the legacy of the resistance in the nation-building process. The range of opinions expressed were carefully collated, analyzed, and documented by a team of Timorese consultants for inclusion in the final report of the veterans commission. While there have been numerous participatory public fora in Timor-Leste, the consultations on the veterans issue was significant given the sensitivity of the issue.

Addressing expectations

The veterans commissions submitted their final report to the President of Timor-Leste in June 2004, who has passed the report to Government and Parliament for the formulation of policy and legislation. The commissions registered 37,000 veterans, of whom 22,000 are still living. Only 30 people served the whole 24 year period of the resistance, and less than 1,300 served more than five years. Based on these figures, Timor-Leste may choose to honor all veterans with medals, certificates, and other forms of honors, but only extend material assistance to the small number who served for longer periods. However, given the widespread poverty in Timor-Leste, the veterans population does not appear to be significantly worse off than the rest of the population.

While the results of the process, in the form of a veterans law or measures of recognition, have yet to be announced, discussions with communities and veterans groups suggest that the process was very welcome and widely perceived as addressing the critical need to define and identify veterans. The veterans commissions process is widely viewed as forming the basis for a veterans policy that will forestall future politicizing of the issue. Additionally, the process itself made a very significant contribution to national stability during Timor-Leste's first two years as a nation-state by addressing veterans and community aspirations in a timely and participatory fashion.

The PCF Occasional Notes

Elisabeth Huybens, Country Manager for Timor-Leste, is the task team leader for this activity. This occasional note was written by Edith Bowles on behalf of the task team. The task team plans to produce a more lengthy study on the process which will encompass an assessment of lessons learned and the potential of the Timor-Leste process to serve as a model addressing veterans issues in other post-conflict settings. *This occasional note series is intended to disseminate good practices, lessons learned and useful information about PCF grants. The series is edited by the PCF Secretariat within the Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction (CPR) Unit in the Social Development Department of the Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development Network of the World Bank. The views expressed in these notes are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank Group, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent. PCF Occasional Notes are distributed widely to the World Bank staff and outside the World Bank and are also available on the PCF website (<http://www.worldbank.org/pcf>).*