



MEDIA RELEASE

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CIVIL UNREST WON'T STOP MUCH-NEEDED AGRICULTURE TRAINING IN EAST TIMOR

Australia's efforts at improving agriculture in East Timor (Timor-Leste) have been on-going, despite disruption caused by civil strife and political upheaval.

"Australia has a range of programs to improve food security in East Timor so that families no longer suffer from a third 'hungry' season, on top of the equatorial wet and dry," said Dick Slack-Smith, Coordinator of the Crawford Fund's NT program.

"Australia's very effective 'Seeds of Life' project is working to help make East Timor self sufficient in food by substituting traditional crops with higher yielding varieties. And Australia is also helping with the redevelopment of East Timor university's agriculture faculty."

"In addition to these significant efforts by AusAID and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), there is a need for on-the-ground training to improve agricultural knowledge and farming techniques, and this is where collaboration between the Crawford Fund and Austcare is getting results."

He noted that the Crawford Fund - an NGO that encourages Australia's involvement in international agricultural research, development and education - has also supported training in aquaculture, livestock, soil and fisheries management and is open to new opportunities.

"The bottom line is that less people will be hungry; the land, ocean and livestock will be better managed and this will stand future generations in good stead in neighbouring East Timor."

"Austcare's Agricultural Development project in Cova Lima, East Timor is well advanced in its major goal for contributing to food security. This has been done by increasing agricultural productivity through very practical training and demonstrations," said Dick.

Dick explained that the training is currently concentrated in Suai District, on a coastal plain on the country's south coast. Prior to independence in 1999, Suai was a major producer of rice, beans, watermelon, maize, vegetables and other crops. The subsequent departure of the trans-migrants from nearby countries resulted in hectares of abandoned farming land, now covered with 2m tall tropical grasses.

"It has been estimated that only 30% of the area of land farmed before independence is currently used. Decreased rainfall levels have further reduced food production, with serious consequences for families," he said.

The Crawford Fund's mission is to increase Australians' engagement in international agricultural research, development and education for the benefit of developing countries and Australia.

“The Austcare training, provided by Maria Julieta Ribeiro Mota and Tomas do Nascimento Barros, centred on alternative crop development using dryland farming techniques,” he said.

AUSTCARE reported that achievements included 5.19 tonnes of rice produced without fertiliser enabling 51 farmers and their families to have enough to eat, invest and put aside for replanting.

“The training had been interrupted by events last year, and final training sessions will now occur in February 2007,” he said.

“AUSTCARE staff are to be heartily congratulated as it seems that in spite of trying political conditions they have achieved considerable progress,” said Dick.

He noted that Austcare is hoping to extend this work using the materials they have produced throughout the country.

For further information, interviews and photos:

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