

# Timor-Leste

## Quick facts

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|---|---|
| Number of IDPs                          | 30,000  |
| Percentage of total population          | 2.5%  |
| Start of current displacement situation | 2006  |
| Peak number of IDPs (and year)          | 150,000 (2006)                                |
| New displacement in 2008                | 0   |
| Returns in 2008                         | 80,000  |
| Causes of displacement                  | Generalised violence, human rights violations |
| Human development index                 | 150   |



An estimated 150,000 people in Timor-Leste were displaced in 2006 as their homes and property were seized or destroyed during violence between rival groups within the army and police and among the wider population. They sought refuge in the capital Dili, in government buildings, schools or churches and subsequently in makeshift camps, or with families and friends in rural districts.

The causes of the crisis included political rivalries dating back to the independence struggle up to 1999, divisions between “easterners” and “westerners”, but also chronic poverty and a large and disempowered youth population. Land disputes from before and immediately after the 1999 independence vote also continued to rankle.

The government launched a new recovery plan in 2008, distributing compensation to people agreeing to leave the camps while progressively ending food distribution and closing camps. By the end of the year, 11,700 households out of the 16,000 who registered to take part in the return programme had received the compensation, and 45 of the existing 56 camps had been closed. The government planned for all IDPs to return home by February 2009.

With the focus on getting IDPs to agree to leave the camps, less attention has been paid to the conditions in return areas, where access to clean water and sanitation, food, basic services and economic opportunities is insufficient to support the long-term needs of the displaced and non-displaced alike.

Some returnees have faced hostility from former neighbours and resentment due the recovery packages they have received, while little reconstruction has taken place and many IDPs who returned to their homes in 2008 had to pitch a tent on their property as their homes were uninhabitable. Land and property issues have been settled on a case-by-case basis, with squatters often agreeing to leave in exchange for some of the IDPs’ compensation money, but more serious cases involving conflicting ownership claims have not been resolved. Problems are more acute for female-headed IDP households as women traditionally do not inherit land and property in Timor-Leste. Many displaced children have had no access to education, because schools have been unable or unwilling to admit them, because of the cost or because they have had to work to supplement family income.

Since the beginning of 2008 the National Recovery Strategy (NRS) has focused on resolving the displacement crisis and in particular the five “pillars” of shelter and housing, social protection, security and stability, socio-economic development, and confidence building and reconciliation. However, the \$15 million budget for 2008 proved far from sufficient to cover the cost of even the housing component, and reliance on international donors to fill the gap has left the strategy exposed.

The Ministry of Social Solidarity (MSS) is responsible for IDP assistance and coordination while the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights and Justice is responsible for monitoring and protecting the rights of the displaced. Like other ministries involved in the NRS, their capacity for co-operation, coordination and planning leaves room for improvement. An “IDP cell” has focused on monitoring IDP rights but its capacity and coverage have also remained limited.

Numerous international agencies are in Timor-Leste, as well as an Australian-led military force. Most issues related to IDP protection are discussed and coordinated through the Humanitarian Coordination Committee and the Protection Working Group led by OHCHR and UNICEF. IOM, UNDP and a number of international NGOs have taken significant roles in responding to internal displacement.

Coordination informally follows the cluster arrangement; there are sectoral working groups with one agency formally responsible. Coordination with the government has followed the NRS pillars, but as of the end of 2008 coordination meetings had only taken place in three of five pillars. The formal implementation of the UN’s cluster approach in early 2009 may lead to a more coordinated and effective response.

A number of outstanding issues must be addressed for durable solutions to become possible. There is a need to address the shortage of housing stock, create new economic opportunities in areas of return for both the returnees and the receiving community, and improve living conditions there. Also, without addressing the causes of the unrest and the displacement, ending widespread impunity for aggressors and setting up a framework to regulate property ownership, the potential for new disputes will remain.