

# MINOR EMERGENCY



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies  
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge  
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja  
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

## TIMOR-LESTE: FOOD INSECURITY

No. 05ME017

22 March 2005

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### In Brief

This Minor Emergency (no. 05ME017) is being issued based on the needs described below reflecting the information available at this time. CHF 50,000 has been allocated from the Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF). Based on further updates and details from assessment reports, or should the situation deteriorate, the Federation may consider international support through an Emergency Appeal.

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### The Situation

An estimated 4,000 people are affected by acute food shortages in Hato Bulico sub-district, Ainaro district of Timor Leste. These communities are in hamlets (aldeia) of Querudo, Blehito, Mau Lahulo, Manumera in the village (sucos) of Mulo; and the hamlets of Hato Bulico, Massuromata, Queorema, and Laquico in the village of Nunumogue.

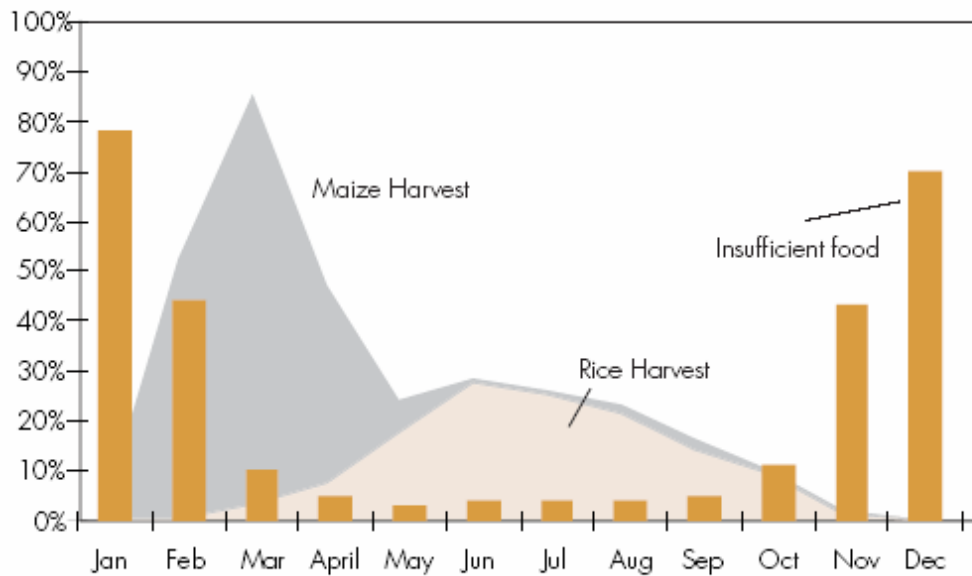
Every year Timor-Leste faces food insecurity in rural areas. In general, this food shortage follows the harvest cycle (see graph below) and is at its greatest during the period between November to February. However, this year the problems have been exacerbated by the delay in rains and recurrent crop failure in some parts of the country. In the worst affected area of Hato Bauilico the primary cause for acute food shortage has been the massive failure of the potato crop – the main cash crop of the community there.

Various previous assessments suggest that food insecurity is widespread in the country. One report in 2003, using household survey data, pointed that close to nine in ten persons experience inadequate food provision at some point during the year, while less than two have too much food during any month in the year. In rural households, where

## Timor-Leste: Food Insecurity; Minor Emergency no. 05ME017

three-quarters of the country's population lives, subsistence agriculture (rice, maize and cassava) is relied on as their main food supply source. Food security, therefore, is closely tied to having enough rice and maize.

### Harvests and patterns of food insecurity

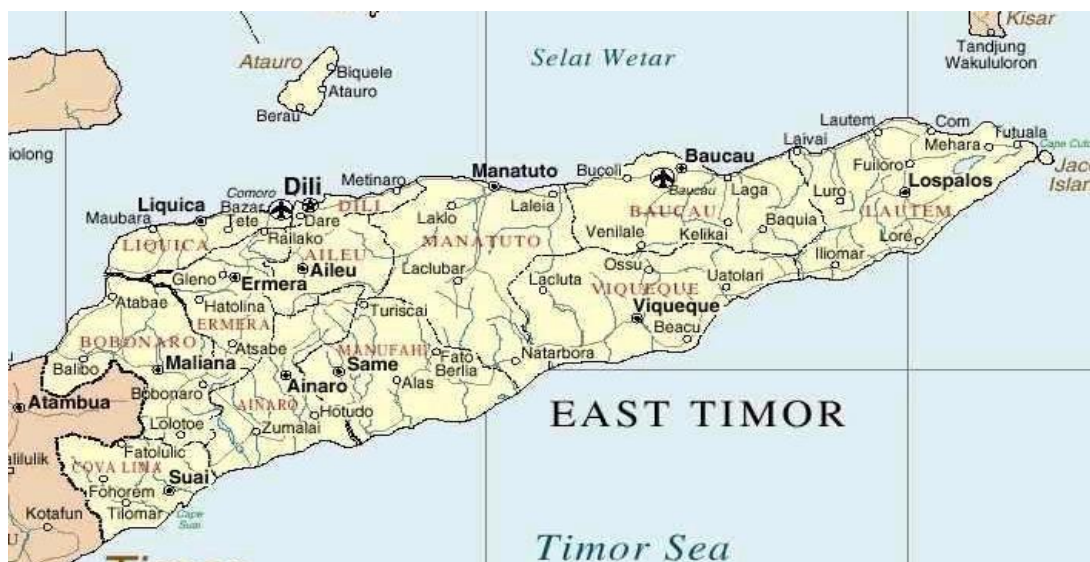


Note: The bars indicate the percentage of sucos reporting insufficient food in that month. The areas indicate the percentage of sucos reporting a maize or rice harvest in that month.

Source: UNDP 2002<sup>1</sup>

In the above-mentioned communities people have been coping with the hunger situation for two months by eating a rudimentary meal of beans, vegetables leaves and yam once a day. Some households that have depleted their meagre supplies of beans and people have resorted to eating boiled plant leaves with salt. There has also been an increase in money borrowing from loan sharks who are charging up to 100 per cent interest on two-month loans.

Worst affected by this situation are infants, children and lactating mothers. Lack of food and absence of much needed nutrients is contributing to increased incidence of respiratory and gastronomic illness.



<sup>1</sup> UNDP (2002). 'East Timor Human Development Report 2002: The Way Ahead', Dili, Timor-Leste.

In a similar assessment the World Food Programme (WFP) reports that people in some other districts have also started to eat “wild food” (e.g. palm roots), reduce their number of meals, sell livestock to buy food and limit intake of rice/maize to once or twice a week. Their report also highlighted an increased incidence of disease, especially, stomach disorders/ache resulting from eating wild food.

The Government of Timor-Leste has also conducted its own assessment of the situation in the country. The government's report concludes that although there is an increased shortage of food in some parts of the country, the situation is acute in localized communities thus making it difficult to target with food assistance. It however acknowledges the poor nutritional status of the population and the risk this poses to people in case of a prolonged food shortage.

The Ministry of Labour and Solidarity has in the meantime sent out five metric tons of food to each district to be distributed to the people in need. In addition, the church is seeking local support to help people it feels are in most need in different districts of the country.

### **Red Cross and Red Crescent action**

The first involvement of the national society, Cruz Vermelha De Timor-Leste (CVTL), in the current situation was in late 2004 when the long drought forced some villagers in Covalima district to walk fifty kilometres in search of water. The society provided water tankers to the communities for a period of one month.

More recently, the society and the Federation deployed a team to assess the food crisis in two districts of Timor-Leste. The assessment mission was in response to alarms raised by the local CVTL branches of the food situation affecting the central and southern coastal areas of the country. This concern was also raised by the Catholic church and the national media. However, all secondary data on this situation could not specifically pinpoint the location and the number of the people affected.

The team prioritized the sub-districts of Hato Builico and Same to conduct the situational assessment and needs analysis. This decision was based on the meeting and discussions with the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) and the social services department of the Ministry of Labor and Solidarity. These areas are also located in the central and southern coastal areas which were reported to be worst affected by the food crisis. Reports of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and WFP, news articles, country delegation reports were utilized as part of the secondary data review.

In summary, the assessment mission confirms the existence of acute food shortage and hunger in Hato Builico caused by a succession of crop failures. This aggravated the already vulnerable condition of the communities. However, the situation in Same has not reached crisis proportions. Although the impact of the drought caused damage to crops there are enough resources for the community to cope with the current situation. Red Cross response is required in Hato Builico which will be aimed at addressing both immediate needs and finding a long-term solution to the food crisis. Red Cross response to Same and other southern coastal communities will be on the monitoring aspect to detect any early deterioration of the condition. This can be done proactively with the network of Red Cross volunteers spread around the area.

Another assessment mission will be conducted in Ermera district to verify reports of similar situations of food shortage and hunger in the upland communities.

Based on the situational assessment and needs analysis, the society has developed a response to the crises in Hato Builico that integrates two approaches – short-term immediate relief and long-term community based food security. In the short-term, response will be in the form of immediate food distribution. Long-term response will overlap near the end of the immediate relief, through the implementation of a community-based risk reduction programme.

CHF 50,000 from the Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) has been allocated to initiate immediate short-term response by the CVTLs through targeted food distribution and to set up a volunteer-based monitoring mechanism of the food insecurity in the country.

**Timor-Leste: Food Insecurity; Minor Emergency no. 05ME017**

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