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E. Timor experiment going well

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IT is an experiment never tried before: the United Nations, together with civilians, administering a nation.

So far it has been working remarkably well and the transitional administrator is thrilled by the success of the pioneering endeavour.

The United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor's (Untaet) chief, Sergio Vieira de Mello, is all smiles when he talks about his Cabinet which was formed in July.

"The UN shares executive authority with the East Timorese. In the eight-member Cabinet, four portfolios are held by locals.

"The four have displayed a high sense of responsibility, discipline and self-restraint in managing resources. There is harmony in the Cabinet and another unique development is that many Untaet staff work under the East Timor Cabinet members. This is a cultural revolution for the UN personnel," he says.

De Mello is scheduled to name eight Deputy Ministers in the next few weeks while the recruitment of civil service staff is continuing.

The four East Timorese Cabinet members are Father Filomeno Jacob (Social Affairs), Mari Alkatiri (Economic Affairs), Joao Carrascaloa (Infrastructure) and Ana Pessoa (Internal Administration).

The UN Cabinet members are Jean Cady (deputy Transitional Administrator and heads the Police and Emergency Services Department), Gita Welch (Justice), Peter Galbraith (Political, Constitutional and Electoral Affairs) and Michael Francino (Finance).

Xanana Gusmao is president of the Council of National Resistance of Timor (CNRT) - an umbrella body of East Timorese political parties. He is expected to become the first President of independent East Timor when elections are held before the end of next year.

De Mello says he is busy establishing an Economic Planning Unit for East Timor - an idea proposed to him by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"When I visited Malaysia and held talks with Dr Mahathir, he advised me that merely dealing with emergencies peculiar to East Timor was insufficient. He said there was a need for a department to carry out medium- and long-term programmes.

"I immediately latched on to the idea and will announce the appointment of the Economic Planning Unit chief soon so that development can be streamlined and all programmes are implemented according to schedule," he says.

On the political front, the creation of the National Council with 33 Timorese representatives to replace the present National Consultative Council is under way.

The new council will comprise one representative from each of the 13 districts, seven from the CNRT, three from political parties outside the CNRT and one each from the Catholic, Protestant and Muslim communities.

The will also be one representative each from the women, students/youth, Timorese non-governmental organisation forum, professional associations, farming community, corporate sector and labour organisation.

The final selection is to be made by Untaet after extensive consultations with the people of East Timor.

De Mello says the council will be a fairly representative body and Untaet is trying to achieve a qualitative system in the transitional

process, moving from consultancy to sharing authority.

He says legislation to register political parties will be ready soon, allowing them to start campaigns to gain the people's support so that when the time for elections arrive, they will be on "cruising speed".

He expressed confidence that the timetable set for the holding of the general election will be adhered to. In addition, measures have been put in place for a free and fair election.

The newly elected parliament could then set about drawing up a constitution.

Asked what role Asean could play in developing East Timor, de Mello says the ten-member group could help by guaranteeing the security of the new-born nation.

"Security is not only a military or police issue but also essentially a political one. We were invited to the Asean Ministerial meeting in Bangkok recently and were overwhelmed by the solidarity shown by all the members.

"Asean leaders have stated clearly and categorically that in due course East Timor should apply for membership in the economic grouping.

"East Timor is dependent on its immediate neighbours. In capacity building there is goodwill in Asean countries in helping to upgrade human resources, improve skills in the public and private sectors.

"We have sent foreign service officers for training at the Institute of Diplomatic and International Relations in Malaysia," he says.

He added that the visit of Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar was fruitful where discussions were held on various aspects of co-operation.

He says the demonstration of Asean concern and willingness to support East Timor are appreciated and hopes that these will turn into firm development and economic support to ensure the new nation will one day be on the same footing as its neighbours.

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