

Funding shortage exposes thousands to disease

Thousands of people living on a remote Timor-Leste island will be put at risk of death and disease if an Australian-based aid program is forced to withdraw at the end of this month due to lack of funds.

Australian Aid International is working with officials on Atauro Island, about 30 kilometres by sea north of Dili, to deliver healthcare services and education to isolated communities affected by disease and limited resources.

But Frank Tyler, Australian Aid International Director of Operations has warned that without continued funding beyond March this year aid operations would prematurely end. He pleaded for donations to help volunteers continue to provide basic healthcare for people in need.

“In response to local flood and bushfire emergencies, Australians’ generosity is evident. Any donation from people or business is vital and is greatly appreciated,” Mr Tyler said.

“Atauro is vulnerable to preventable and easily treatable disease because its population simply cannot access basic health services. Communicable diseases including malaria are endemic, accounting for almost two thirds of deaths throughout Timor-Leste. Only half the population has access to drinking water, while maternal mortality and child malnutrition rates are among the highest in the region.”

Mr Tyler said Australian Aid International has been providing support and assistance to Atauro’s District Health Service and Community Health Centre’s for almost two years.

The organisation has helped establish more than 150 mobile medical outreach clinics and facilitated the majority of aero-medical evacuations to Dili, he said. It has also provided internationally trained doctors to conduct clinical consultations, provided medical education for local healthcare staff and obtained funding for a remote area nurses to work on the Island.

Mr Tyler said preventative health promotion for adults and school children was complemented by capacity building operations – equipping local healthcare providers with medical, financial and computing skills, and education to on-train other community members so the island could help itself in time. He said the number of patients presenting to clinics is increasing as they become aware of the regular and reliable healthcare service. As a result, more people now have access to healthcare and treatment for malaria and other diseases that would otherwise have poor outcomes for the patients.

“It is essential that operations on Atauro continue. This year we plan to supplement where possible, medical supplies and drugs to ensure essential supplies are maintained, and continue to develop health promotion sessions focussing on respiratory conditions and women’s health,” he said.

Project funding (about \$180,000 USD per year) is directed entirely to local initiatives and is considered minimal compared to operating costs of other NGOs and projects in Timor-Leste.

Australian Aid International is an international non-profit, non-government organisation. More information about its operations in Atauro and other communities is available at: www.aai.org.au

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