

Letter to the United Nations on Women and Upcoming East Timor Elections

Charles Scheiner, National Coordinator, East Timor Action Network, 1 March 2001

Dear Excellency [Mr. Kofi Annan]:

In one of the world's most remarkable examples of struggle and success, the people of East Timor are at long last moving towards full independence for their country, in partnership with the United Nations. The National Council of East Timor recently approved recommendations for this process, which the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) will shortly decide whether to approve. One Council recommendation with wide support from women's groups and other elements of East Timorese civil society requires that at least 30 percent of candidates in the upcoming elections be women. We are writing to express our strong support for this recommendation.

An assessment of the participation of East Timorese women in decision making carried out by Oxfam and the East Timorese women's organization FOKUPERS recommended that a quota system be adopted to ensure women's representation in government. In interviews with women across the country, the assessment team found women currently "lacked information" on political issues and "had little opportunity to participate in... decision making." A conference on women in politics organized by FOKUPERS and the Sahe Institute for Liberation in East Timor also supported setting minimum levels for political participation by women. Participants in the conference included representatives from the National Council of Timorese Resistance, the Catholic Church, UNTAET, and East Timorese nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The conference report stated that the present under-representation of women in decision-making bodies results in "the interests of women... not being guaranteed in the new institutions of power."

Although they have made many contributions to their society through the independence movement, literacy campaigns, and other community service efforts, East Timorese women remain one of the most marginalized segments of the population. Women in East Timor face the dark legacy of widespread rape and other forms of gender violence during the Indonesian military occupation, rising rates of domestic violence, discrimination in educational opportunities, and other limitations placed by a male-dominated society. To effectively address these and other issues of concern, East Timorese women must be adequately represented in the government and other policy-setting bodies.

During a recent visit to East Timor, I found a pervasive pattern of discrimination against women by men in all sectors of society, including UNTAET and the East Timor Transitional Administration, NGOs, local communities, and families. The legacy of centuries of colonialism and occupation will be difficult to undo, especially for the marginalized female majority. Even when an effort is made to address this as in the requirement for 50 percent female representation on local and district councils of the World Bank's Community Empowerment Project men continue to dominate discussion and decision-making.

Recently, a high-ranking East Timorese official was charged with violently assaulting his wife. This is only the most visible example of a widespread problem in East Timorese society. Requiring significant levels for participation for women in the electoral process does not guarantee the end of discrimination, but it allows women to directly address these issues and sets an important example for the wider society. Furthermore, the presence of women in government will help to ensure that the future East Timorese administration attends to issues of gender discrimination and violence more effectively than the Portuguese or Indonesian rulers of East Timor have done.

The following countries have implemented quota systems to ensure women's representation in elected bodies: Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, India, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Tanzania, and Venezuela. The experience of Bangladesh, in particular, suggests that East Timor would do well to set a minimum level for women's political participation. Although women's literacy in Bangladesh is low (25 percent), quotas have successfully increased the meaningful participation of women in the national Parliament and municipal and local governmental bodies. In fact, Bangladesh has had two consecutive women prime ministers.

The United Nations founding Charter declares its faith "in the equal rights of men and women," and has long worked towards that ideal. The Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) calls for equal access to and opportunities in political and public life for women. In its recommendations to CEDAW signatories, UNIFEM states, "a good policy to which the government is genuinely committed has great value. It can lead quickly to widespread, concrete changes if, for example, it specifies budget allocations for women's issues or quotas for women's representation at decision-making levels."

We hope that UNTAET will, at the behest of the East Timorese society it serves and in keeping with the United Nations' commitment to women's empowerment worldwide, rule in favor of a requirement for at least 30 percent women candidates in the upcoming elections in East Timor.

Sincerely,

Charles Scheiner, National Coordinator, East Timor Action Network

cc: High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson
Special Representative to the Secretary General Sergio Vieira de Mello
United States Mission to the United Nations:
Ambassador James B. Cunningham
Piper Campbell, Asia Advisor
Sir Kieran Prendergast, Department of Political Affairs, Electoral Assistance Division
Members, Security Council
Additional background and alert