

Building democracy

in East Timor

Australia's Parliament has joined efforts to build democracy in East Timor. Senior House of Representatives official, David Elder, and two staff from the NSW Parliament recently visited East Timor to assist members of the fledgling nation's new National Council in the transition to democratic government.

With 36 members drawn from all sections of East Timorese society, the National Council is serving as a transitional national parliament. It considers all laws proposed by the United Nations Transitional Administration for East Timor (UNTAET) and proposes its own regulations.

While UNTAET retains wide powers in administering East Timor, the new National Council is regarded by the East Timorese as a significant step forward in their transition towards control of their own affairs.

The procedures used by the Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly have become a model for East Timor's National Council, with modifications to meet

local requirements. Training on the operation of those procedures was provided by the Australian parliamentary team.

"Many of the National Council members had little background in parliamentary procedures and processes," said David Elder. "But a number of the members had definite views on how they saw the National Council working with UNTAET."

The Australian team was on hand to advise the National Council and its Speaker, Xanana Gusmao, as they began the job of considering regulations for the 2001 budget and the tax system. This included committee hearings at which cabinet officials were questioned on the details of the regulations and members of the East Timorese community were given an opportunity to voice their views.

ACT Assembly procedures have become a model for East Timor.

Which language to use has been one of the interesting dilemmas facing the National Council. All material is being translated into Portuguese, English and Bahasa Indonesian. This is proving to be both costly and time-consuming, sometimes delaying proceedings while translations are completed.

Another dilemma for the National Council has been the lack of staff qualified in providing administrative support and procedural advice to a legislative body. Recruitment and training of staff has been recognised as an immediate priority to ensure the proper functioning of the Council.

"No-one should underestimate the challenges facing East Timor in its transition to independence and democracy," said David Elder. "But at the same time, no-one should underestimate the desire and the tenacity of the East Timorese to make democracy work."

"The job of rebuilding East Timor and preparing it for nationhood is immense. It's not just the physical reconstruction. It's also ensuring that there are

robust institutions, including a parliament, a judiciary and a civil service. All of these are so important for the governing of the new country, and in all of these areas Australia is in a good position to provide advice and support when needed.

"The involvement of Australian parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in developing a working national parliament for East Timor is one way that we can show our support for one of our nearest neighbours."

The transition from United Nations administration to full independence for East Timor is expected to occur later this year.

The visit to East Timor by staff of the House of Representatives and the NSW Parliament was made possible through the development assistance program of the Australian International Agency for Development (AusAID).



Supporting the establishment of East Timor's National Council: (left to right) Lynn Lovelock (NSW Legislative Council), Xanana Gusmao (East Timor National Council), David Elder (Department of the House of Representatives) and David B'unt (NSW Legislative Council).



Headquarters of the United Nations Transitional Administration for East Timor (UNTAET) in the capital, Dili.