



4 March 2022

A message from Australia's Ambassador to Timor-Leste, Bill Costello



It was my great privilege and pleasure to present my credentials to Timor-Leste's President H.E. Francisco 'Lu-Olo' Guterres on Friday 25 February. In this 20th year of diplomatic relations between Timor-Leste and Australia, I am proud to be Australia's 8th Ambassador to Timor-Leste, and pleased to follow in the footsteps of good friends and colleagues, most recently Peter Roberts.

I start my term in Dili with Australia's bilateral relationship with Timor-Leste in very good shape. This has been amply demonstrated during two great high-level interactions between our leaders recently. Our two Prime Ministers held a positive and productive virtual meeting on 17 February, and released [this statement](#). Timor-Leste's Foreign Minister H.E. Adaljiza Magno also had a highly productive one-week visit to Canberra, Griffith (NSW) and Darwin – as demonstrated by her many and varied Facebook posts!



Photo credit: Office of the Prime Minister of Timor-Leste

One milestone achieved during Minister Magno's Australian visit was the signing – during her meeting with Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women Senator the Hon Marise Payne on 10 February ([statement here](#)) – of the bilateral MOU on the new Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, which will come into effect on 4 April this year. The PALM scheme will increase opportunities for Timorese workers in Australia, including for skills development, and in a range of industries – not just agriculture. (I should know: I led the work on designing the new PALM scheme in my previous role in Canberra.)

Our two Foreign Ministers also recently participated in a four-way meeting of female Foreign Ministers, also involving Minister Marsudi of Indonesia and Minister Mahuta of New Zealand. As Minister Payne said, a meeting of four regional women Foreign Ministers sends a powerful and positive message for gender equality.

COVID-19, and specifically the Omicron variant, has again given us some unfortunate surprises this year. Not least among these was Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak's inability to travel to Australia in February – we had a great program lined up for him! COVID has clearly also caused some real disruption and illness in Dili recently – including in my household. It is pleasing that, with relatively high vaccination rates in Dili, hospitalisation and death rates have been relatively low to date. But I remind everyone of the importance of COVID safe practices such as mask wearing and social distancing. No-one wants to be the person who passes COVID to someone who becomes seriously ill.





Of course, COVID is far from Timor-Leste's only health challenge, as the current Dengue outbreak sadly reminds us. Australia has been a long-term partner of Timor-Leste's health sector, and Prime Minister Morrison announced a further five-year \$30 million Australian commitment to health support in Timor-Leste. At a regional level, the Australian Government will make a further five-year, \$375 million strategic investment in our region's health security, which will strengthen health systems and help us prepare for (further) emerging infectious disease outbreaks.

However, and thanks to the protection provided to us by COVID vaccines, I am confident that the way we all work, rest and travel will increasingly return to normal this year. Clear evidence for this is the fact that Australia has reopened its international borders on Monday 21 February. And our Timorese friends are now increasingly able to travel to Australia as temporary workers under the PALM scheme (56 have travelled to date this year, and a further 775 are currently preparing to travel for work soon) and as recipients of Australia Awards scholarships (36 awardees are travelling to commence studies in Australia this year). We also look forward to seeing more Australians travelling to Timor-Leste this year, for business and pleasure.

Greatly assisting this resurgence in travel between our two countries is the welcome development of Timor-Leste's

approval for Qantas to operate commercial services under our 2021 bilateral air services agreement. Qantas announced on 15 February that it will operate regular commercial services from 1 April, initially with three flights per week, but with plans to increase to five flights per week. Airnorth has also resumed regular flights, and it is great to see two strong Australian airlines servicing the Darwin to Dili route.

One thing that is already clear to me is that, like Australia, Timor-Leste is a proud democracy. Both our nations have elections coming up in the next few months. Those with a strong interest in politics will be able to watch closely both Timor-Leste's Presidential poll – with a strong field of 16 approved candidates – and the Australian Federal election. The Embassy will be undertaking election monitoring in a range of districts across Timor-Leste, and we look forward to sharing with you the colour and movement we observe on polling day.

The Embassy will keep producing these newsletters periodically this year – in addition to our regular Facebook posts – and I will stay involved. One topic I want to focus on later this year is Australia's support for infrastructure development in Timor-Leste. There are some exciting projects in preparation at the moment, and I look forward to letting you know more about them.

Obrigadu, Bill.



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