

Australia should match Cuban aid to East Timor

Wednesday 30 January 2008, by [ILTIS Tony](#) (Date first published: 26 January 2008).

A group of Australian writers, academics, NGO workers and activists have written an open letter to incoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd calling for Australia to increase its development assistance to East Timor.

The letter points out that Cuba, which unlike Australia is neither a rich country nor a neighbour of East Timor, gives much greater aid in terms of human capacity building, and calls on Australia to match Cuba's generosity.

Initiating signatory Tim Anderson, senior lecturer in political economy at Sydney University, told Green Left Weekly that "ordinary Australians are interested in aid getting through". He explained that the letter was to "try [to] engender a healthy competition" in generosity between the two countries as opposed to the "unhealthy competitiveness" he has observed from the Australian aid industry.

He accused some Australian aid agencies, as well as journalists, of trying to ignore the Cuban program and sniping at it. He also pointed to the lobbying by former foreign minister Alexander Downer who tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Pacific countries to reject Cuban health and literacy workers on the grounds that they would destabilise the region. The letter is a response to the "risk of continuity" in policy towards Australia's island neighbours from the incoming federal Labor government.

Cuba currently has 300 health workers in East Timor, including 230 doctors. There are also 800 Timorese medical students in Cuba, with 1000 scholarships being offered.

Anderson told GLW that the "the next cab off the rank is the Solomon Islands", which will be getting 40 Cuban doctors and 50 scholarships to Cuba. Talks are underway with Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. Cuban medical aid throughout the world is accompanied by literacy programs and the training of local health workers, making it "capacity building" rather than creating ongoing dependence.

By contrast, "in relation to health and education, Australian aid is patchy, Canberra-driven and [focused on] iconic projects."

He noted that while Australia was willing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a military intervention that was increasingly unpopular in East Timor, the number of tertiary scholarships offered to Timorese students was a mere eight.

"Even by AusAID's accounting methods, which value the scholarships at \$90,000 each, this is a drop in the bucket compared to the military intervention."

Using the Cuban example, Anderson said it was important to "get away from the idea of measuring

aid by dollars. This masks the costing and the recycling of aid money into Australian pockets. [PM Kevin] Rudd's increase of overseas aid by \$500 million could be a good thing or a waste of money." Instead, he said, aid should be measured in terms of human capacity building.

P.S.

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