

BULLETIN

United Nations Development Programme
Washington Liaison Office



*The UNDP Washington **Bulletin** is a regular update by the Washington Office of UNDP activities and events. We invite you to share the **Bulletin** with interested colleagues.*

PERIL & PROGRESS: MARKING MINE ACTION AWARENESS DAY IN IRAQ

Though open conflict still ravages in Iraq, the greatest danger for many civilians there is a continuing legacy of wars that ended years ago. Millions of landmines and tons of unexploded ordnance, buried in the country's fields and roads, form a lethal obstacle to reconstruction and sustainable development. This is a grim reminder as, this week, the international community commemorated Mine Action Awareness Day on April 4th.

In Iraq, the UNDP-supported Landmine Impact Survey has identified more than 4,000 areas suspected of contamination or hazard from landmines and explosive remnants of war. The Basra governorate alone has almost 1,800 square kilometers of contaminated terrain—more than 9% of Basra's total land area. In the past two years, more than 560 Iraqi civilians have been killed or injured by mines and explosive remnants of war, and it is believed that many more such casualties have gone unreported.

Progress is clear: the Iraqi Ministry of Planning's National Mine Action Authority (NMAA) and UNDP report success in finding and clearing buried explosives from Iraqi soil. In the country's southern regions, 9.5 million square meters of land were recently cleared of over 25,000 munitions, releasing this land for productive agricultural use. UNDP-supported mine-impact surveys have been completed in seven southern and three northern governorates in Iraq.

But millions of hidden explosives, some containing radioactive depleted uranium, remain. UNDP's \$8.4 million mine action program provides technical advisors to NMAA and supports two nongovernmental organizations tasked with clearing mines and explosive remnants of war in southern Iraq. UNDP is also supporting and facilitating the training of NMAA personnel.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: UNDP IS REGISTERING VOTERS, RAMPING UP CIVIC EDUCATION, AND PREPARING FOR THE LARGEST UN ELECTORAL MISSION IN HISTORY

Democracy took a historic step forward in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) last month when President Joseph Kabila promulgated a new electoral law that sets June 18th as the date of the first election in the DRC's 46-year history as an independent nation. The elections are an important step in a peace process aimed at ending a five-year civil war in the country, which has affected six neighboring countries and killed four million people.

Preparations for the June parliamentary and presidential vote already constitute the largest and most complex UN electoral-assistance mission ever undertaken, a \$422.9 million joint initiative of UNDP and the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC).

The new election law follows an almost year-long process that included the creation of an independent election commission, training poll workers, and a nationwide voter-registration campaign. With support from UN peacekeepers and the UNDP Electoral Assistance Project, 25.7 million Congolese have registered to vote in a country with few functioning roads or basic infrastructure. The 176-pound voter registration kits—each containing a laptop computer, fingerprinting materials, and a digital camera—were distributed to every village in the vast country by means ranging from light aircraft and trucks to dugout canoes and litters hand-carried through dense rainforest.

UNDP and its partners also have ramped up a strong civic-education process, a crucial component in preparing citizens for the election. Through plays, music and classes, UNDP and its partners have brought the democratic process to life.

A 17,000-strong UN peacekeeping force, also the largest in UN history, will assist local and national police in the effort to guarantee a peaceful, orderly election process. After the elections are held, UNDP's governance unit in the DRC will continue the work of building democratic capacity. UNDP will support civil society institutions, help build an accessible judiciary system, and continue with civic education efforts.

UNDP has produced two compilations of video footage that tell the “story behind the story” – the dedication of individuals, the hope of a nation, the Herculean organizational challenge. Access these short videos [here](#) (scroll down to the bottom of the page).

UNDP FINDS CHRONIC POVERTY DEEPENING IN EAST TIMOR; ENCOURAGES COUNTRY TO ENSURE FUTURE OIL & GAS REVENUES BENEFIT RURAL POOR

A recently-released UNDP national human development report finds that, four years after gaining independence, East Timor remains one of the world's least-developed nations.

The UN's newest member state ranks below all ASEAN countries on the human-development index. Half the population lacks safe drinking water, 60 of 1,000 infants born alive die before their first birthday, and life expectancy, at only 55.5 years of age in 2004, is stagnant.

Against a backdrop of continuing withdrawal of the UN presence and the decline of foreign assistance to East Timor, *[The Path out of Poverty: Integrated Rural Development](#)*, concludes that, though politically the country is free, its people remain chained by poverty.

In January of this year, East Timor signed a treaty with Australia allowing oil and gas development projects to go ahead in the Timor Sea. Yet, the report stresses that as 80 percent of households in East Timor earn a living from agriculture, revenues from oil and gas will reduce poverty only if channeled towards rural development and the accompanying education, healthcare, and job training that allow citizens to improve their lives. Poverty in the country is already most severe in the rural areas. The vast proportion of current investment is directed to the capital of Dili and only one-third of total public expenditure and one-fifth of goods and services target rural districts.

The Government of East Timor has already moved to safeguard any potential oil and gas wealth. In June 2005, the nation's Parliament unanimously approved the creation of a Petroleum Fund to serve as a single account into which all petroleum revenue will be deposited, and from which all development funds will come. Nonetheless, East Timor will need to rely on technical support from its partners, such as UNDP, to build much-needed human and institutional capacity for development.

The report suggests practical steps the Timorese government should take to help the poor work their way out of poverty, including:

- Improve access to credit for farmers by establishing a Rural Development Bank;
- Initiate land reform to prevent further degradation of overused land, including the issuing of titles to provide security of tenure;
- Support fiscal decentralization to increase the share of public funds allocated to rural areas;
- Establish rice and maize production and marketing cooperatives for major irrigation projects in targeted areas;

- Encourage transport cooperatives connecting the main production areas with major consumer markets, while improving construction and maintenance cooperatives for rural roads to schools and health centers;
- Provide credit and incentives to entrepreneurs who have the ability to take risks to set up businesses in rural areas.

The report highlights the major positive steps East Timor has taken in recent years, embracing the return to democracy that has allowed its people a much greater say in determining the country's future path, putting East Timor "in the vanguard of popular participation." With great potential for development in the offshore hydrocarbon reserves, the report stresses that the challenge for East Timor now lies in ensuring people throughout the country have the capacity to take advantage of these opportunities.

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UNDP is the UN's global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. We are on the ground in 166 countries, working with them on their own solutions to global and national development challenges. As they develop local capacity, they draw on the people of UNDP and our wide range of partners.

For additional information on the above news, please contact communications officer Cara Santos Pianesi at **UNDP's Washington Office** at 202.331.9130 or cara.santos@undp.org.

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