

BALANCE

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ROBED FOR EAST TIMOR JUSTICE

After each judge appointed to East Timor's first truly independent judiciary was sworn in, they donned a robe symbolising the transition of their role to one of independence and impartiality in the pursuit of justice.

In a moving ceremony the robes, provided by their colleagues in the Australian legal community, served as reminder of the importance of an independent judiciary among the democratic legal communities of the world.

Eight judges and two prosecutors were appointed by the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) at a ceremony at the Dili District Court on 7 January this year.

Transitional Administrator and Chairperson of the Transitional Judicial Service Commission Bishop Nascimento presided over the event.

The appointment of the judiciary was described as "a truly new beginning" with the ten appointees facing the exciting but daunting task of establishing the East Timor judicial system almost "from scratch".

In fact the vast destruction of Dili meant one of the first tasks was to seek tables and chairs for the courthouse. These were organised with the help of Richard Coates, director of the Legal Aid Commission of the Northern Territory and the financial support of the Criminal Lawyers Association of the NT.

Lawyers from around Australia also responded promptly to a plea for robes for the swearing in ceremony.

The Law Society of the ACT generously provided 10 robes, the Victorian Bar Association pledged seven robes, while a further robe has been promised by the NSW Bar Association. Financial support was pledged by the Law Society of South Australia and the Law Council of Australia.

Speaking in Darwin after a week long training program for potential members of the East Timor judiciary last month, the

principal legal advisor to UNTAET Mr Hans Strohmeyer praised the jurists for their dedication.

"Despite the great challenges facing these jurists, they are to be commended for their impressive sense of responsibility, their strong commitment to building an independent judiciary - one

that is free of corruption and undue political influence," he says.

Mr Strohmeyer also praised the jurists for their understanding of the enormity of the task and their willingness to work with their international colleagues.

Members of the Darwin legal profession had an opportunity to meet with 20 of the East Timorese at an informal lunch while they were in the city partaking in the training session.

The contingent met with lecturers from the Northern Territory University, the Legal Aid Commission of the

Northern Territory, Chief Justice Brian Martin, and the Director of Public Prosecutions, Mr Rex Wild QC as part of their training.

The lunch, hosted by the Law Society of the North-



A newly appointed member of the East Timor judiciary dons his robe after a moving ceremony at Dili District Courthouse on 7 January, watched by supporters.

ern Territory, allowed members of the NT profession to personally offer support and camaraderie to the East Timorese. While much of the conversations were conducted through interpreters a few members of the Darwin profession delighted the visitors by speaking with them directly in Bahasa.

