

TIMOR LESTE

Reaching out to vulnerable children in Timor-Leste

For any child, stepping into a police station can be a daunting experience. But in Dili, officers from the Vulnerable Persons' Unit (VPU) of the Timorese Police are offering a warm welcome, together with an outdoor playground and a child-friendly interview room.

"Before we had to work harder to put the children at ease, but now, with the toys, crayons and books, they feel more comfortable to talk to us," says VPU Officer Natercia Babo de Jesus.

In early August, UNICEF staff and children from various groups came together to paint and decorate the police station. Very quickly, cheerful scenes of animals, flowers, stars and moon and the sea filled the walls; multicoloured handprints by the children also appeared on the centre's exterior walls.

Inside the interview room, a large mural depicting UNICEF Timor-Leste's Marta icon added a rainbow of colours. This room, together with toys and drawing materials from UNICEF, will allow police officers to interview child victims, witnesses and alleged juvenile offenders in a warm and caring environment. Most victims of abuse are too ashamed or too afraid to report complaints; the child-friendly police station aims to address this problem.

"We train the officers to relax the child and establish trust before starting any interviews by talking about things of interest or to engage in play or drawing," says UNICEF's Child Protection Officer, Ann Linnarsson. "So this child-friendly room is the perfect place to get the investigations off to a good start."

UNICEF has been working with VPU since 2004. This Unit, comprising national and UN police officers, specializes in investigating gender-based violence and other crimes against women and children. UNICEF has provided training on child rights, child-friendly investigation techniques, and laws and procedures in the justice system. This year, it is assisting VPU with legal and other technical guidance to help them finalize the Rules of Procedures for cases involving children, in line with international and Timorese laws and frameworks.

"When I was painting alongside a boy, he asked if this was a children's prison," remarks UNICEF's Child Protection Specialist Lauren Rumble. "This was because most Timorese know only of the children's prison and have never seen a child-friendly police station like this one. We will support other VPUs in the districts to establish similar child-friendly police stations," says Rumble.

The welcoming atmosphere earned the thumbs-up from the children who helped decorate the place. "I hope I can come to the police station to tell what happened to me, eat and play with toys... so that I can play together with other children and forget our trauma and difficulties," says 12-year-old Francisca Amaral. For 13-year-old Zaquel Pinto, "this is a happy place."

Happy places are what Timorese children yearn for right now. Since April 2006, the country has had to deal with outbreaks of violence; thousands of children have been affected by widespread population displacement, while many were recruited into armed groups or gangs. More than a year later, large numbers are still living in displacement camps and host communities, lacking proper health, water, sanitation and education.

"Women and children are the primary victims of violence and conflict in Timor-Leste. VPU officers are the frontline defence for women and children's protection, facilitating access to care and support services and helping victims pursue their right to justice," says Rumble. "The VPU is a valuable resource to the people of Timor-Leste and must be provided with the necessary human and financial resources to continue its important work."

While progress has been made, more needs to be done to raise awareness amongst communities about children's right to justice, and where and how to report violations of children's rights. New laws and policies for children's protection continue to be developed. Capacity-building is urgently required amongst security and legal professionals so as to help carry out these principles on the ground.

UNICEF is currently supporting the Government to assess VPU's management and operations so that its services can be further improved. The UNICEF child protection programme aims to build a protective environment at national and community levels and includes scaled-up technical support to Government and Police to help realize children's right to justice and provide timely support services to child victims.