

Los Palos trial adjourned for 2 ½ weeks

JSMP, Dili 24/8 01

The trial against the ten accused in the Los Palos case was yesterday adjourned for two and a half weeks as two of the judges hearing the case are taking their holiday leave. The Special Panel for serious crimes, comprised of Marcelo Dolzany da Costa (Brazil), Sylver Ntukamazina (Burundi) and Maria Natercia Gusmao Pereira (East Timor), has during the first 29 days of trial heard statements from all accused as well as 17 of the almost 30 scheduled witnesses. The court also went on a one-day crime scene visit to the district of Lautem. Originally intended to last approximately six weeks, the trial has recently ended its seventh week. It is now expected that final statements will not be presented at least until the first week of October.

The length of the trial has left the new East Timorese judicial system with substantial problems, not least of which is the suspension of all other serious crimes hearings. On 13 August 1999 the Special Panel adjourned all other active cases, three of which were already listed for trial this month, until after the judgment in the Los Palos trial. In its reasons the Special Panel noted the special importance of the Los Palos case, as well as the fact that all of the judges and most of the public defenders in the case are also involved in the other serious crimes cases. The imminent expiration of the contracts of international staff involved in the Los Palos case, including a public defender and one of the judges, has created additional procedural problems for the court.

The ten men on trial are all accused of crimes against humanity, and seven of them for committing, aiding, abetting or otherwise assisting in the murder of a group of clergy on or about 25 September 1999.