

Covalima airport at Suai, the new addition to the family of white elephants

June 2017

As announced in the East Timor media on June 21, 2017:

Lu-Olo inaugurates Kayrala Xanana Gusmão Airport in Covalima

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President of the Republic, Francisco Guterres Lu-Olo on Tuesday (20/06) officially inaugurated Kayrala Xanana Gusmão Airport in Covalima. Lu-Olo said the airport would beneficiate Timorese people's movement to the southern coast. The construction of the Airport costs US\$ 67.691.189.19 and it was implemented by Waskita Karya Company since 2014 and terminated in February 2017. "The Airport will make people's movement is easier and faster," Lu-Olo said.

In 2009, a study about the reopening of the existing Suai airfield was conducted, and an offer was made to the Timorese government, to the effect that, in order for the airfield to become operational, no more than a hundred thousand dollars was required to enclose it and make it safe. The money the government chose to spend to build a brand new airport, though, is a stupendous US\$68 million, while the common people lack every necessity of life. The fact of the matter is that there is no sizeable potential air traffic in Suai, and no market for any, save in 14 seats Cessna Caravan aircraft, as was proposed in 2009. For US\$68 million the government could have purchased a fleet of thirty-five brand new Cessna Caravans with upgraded engines, whereas one or two would have sufficed. The government can now boast a nice airport, but no aircraft, and no traffic, so to speak.

If the airport is to be depreciated over a 25 year period, its operators will have to generate a revenue of US\$25,000 every day, including maintenance and operational costs. Even at 10% of the price tag, the revenue required would be a still whopping US\$2,500 per day. For reference, international air traffic out of the capital, Dili, is less than 200 to 300 passengers a day each way, on average. How much daily traffic could Suai see by a wild stretch of imagination? 20 passengers each way, perhaps? To cover costs, each passenger would need to be charged an airport tax of US\$625 upon leaving, and as much upon arriving, US\$1,250 for a round trip. There is only one destination, Dili, a 15 to 20 minutes flight in a Cessna Caravan, in which passengers could be profitably flown for \$50 per flight, plus tax.

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Incidentally, for the sake of propriety, one would think the government could have waited until the National Hero had passed away before naming Suai airport after him.