

# Work lifeline for East Timor

By **BEN DOHERTY**

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EAST Timor could win a last-minute place in an Australian pilot program for guest workers after Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao wrote to his Australian counterpart urging that his country be included.

A month ago, East Timor appeared certain to be excluded from the Government's pilot scheme, to be announced by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd this month.

Workers will be chosen from five Pacific countries only.

But lobbying from within and outside government ranks has strengthened support for the fledgling nation to be included.

Sources have told *The Age* the Government has been entertain-

ing the idea of a guest-worker program for East Timorese in Western Australia.

Western Australia has already signed a memorandum of understanding with East Timor to bring workers to the Kimberleys, but the program needs approval from the Federal Government to go ahead.

In a letter to Mr Rudd, Mr Gusmao said there was little or no work for young Timorese at home, even in the capital Dili, and few opportunities for formal vocational education.

"Over 50% of our population is under 18 years of age and, every year, thousands of young people enter a developing employment market providing limited opportunities," Mr Gusmao wrote.

Unemployment in East Timor exceeds 40%. The situation is worse for men under 25 — more than half have no jobs.

Mr Rudd is expected to announce details of Australia's guest-worker pilot when he visits the island of Niue for a Pacific Islands Forum this month.

Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa, Kiribati and Tuvalu are certain to be included, with East Timor the only other country under immediate consideration.

A draft report by Human Securities International, a Dili-based development organisation, says the Kimberley is facing crippling labour shortages in tourism, horticulture and aquaculture, including pearl production. Its employment market is similar to East Timor's.