



PRIME
MINISTER

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY
THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF TIMOR-LESTE,
DR RUI MARIA DE ARAÚJO,
AT THE WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY CONFERENCE**

Dili
10 May 2017

Excellencies

Distinguished guests

Members of the press

Ladies and gentlemen

It is an honour to speak at this Conference celebrating World Press Freedom Day and the 1st Anniversary of the Press Council of Timor-Leste.

World Press Freedom Day was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1993. The day celebrates the fundamental principle of press freedom. It is the day to evaluate press freedom around the world while reminding us that we must continue to defend the media from attacks on their independence and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession.

The theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day is 'Critical Minds for Critical Times: the Media's role in advancing peaceful, just and inclusive societies'.

This theme focuses on the contribution of free and quality journalism to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 which is to promote peaceful and inclusive societies.

Timor-Leste and the g7+ group of countries led the campaign for goal 16 to be included in the Sustainable Development Goals.

We championed this SDG because we knew from our lived experience working to build peace and to build our State, that you cannot achieve development without peace.

The pursuit of peace requires freedom of expression and a quality media to defend democracy, ensure that the rule of law is applied and expose corruption and social injustice.

That is why Timor-Leste is so pleased that this year the international focus of the World Press Freedom Day is exploring the relationship between a free press and the development of peaceful and inclusive societies.

The main global event celebrating World Press Freedom Day 2017 was held in Jakarta last week. I am pleased to say that our own José Ramos-Horta gave a keynote address, along with His Excellency Joko Widodo, the President of Indonesia, and Her Excellency Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO.

Today's international conference in Dili will discuss the important issues that were covered in Jakarta; focusing on the role of critical minds, at this critical time, in building peaceful and fair societies.

Members of the press
Ladies and gentlemen

In Timor-Leste we know well the importance of a brave and a free press. We do not forget the central role the international media played in supporting our people at their time of greatest need during our struggle for independence.

World Press Freedom Day also provides an opportunity to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession.

We will not forget that in October 1975 five young reporters travelled from Australia to cover the unfolding tragedy in our country.

Greg Shackleton, Gary Cunningham, Tony Stewart, Brian Peters and Malcolm Rennie were killed as they filmed the invasion of our country from the border town of Balibo. A sixth reporter, Roger East, was executed after he came to Timor to investigate the deaths of the Balibo 5. They were all courageous and selfless reporters who lost their lives attempting to tell our story to the world.

Nor will we forget the critical impact of the footage of the 1991 Santa Cruz Massacre that was taken by journalist Max Stahl, and the bravery of American journalists Amy Goodman and Allan Nairn who were caught in the massacre and beaten as they tried to protect Timorese.

Max Stahl's film was smuggled out by a Dutch journalist Saskia Kouwenberg and caused outrage when it screened on televisions around the world.

We also recognise Australian journalist Jill Joliffe, who was evacuated from Dili just before the invasion in 1975, and devoted her life to finding the truth about the deaths of the Balibo 5 and to exposing the suffering of the Timorese people.

And in 1990, journalist Robert Domm made the dangerous journey into the mountains of Timor to record the first ever interview with the leader of our resistance, Xanana Gusmao. This interview provided evidence to the world that the Timorese were putting up organised resistance to the occupation.

It was the efforts of these journalists, and others like them that kept our struggle for independence alive in the hearts and minds of activists around the world.

When our leaders drafted our Constitution, they ensured that Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press were safeguarded in Sections 40 and 41.

The Government of Timor-Leste takes these constitutional protections very seriously.

We recognise the importance of a free press to democracy, accountability and the consolidation of our State, which is why the Government is working in partnership with the local media to develop a skilled and well-resourced journalism profession.

Quality journalism made a meaningful contribution to our struggle for liberation, and the development of our nation and our progress as a society will again benefit from quality journalism.

A free and professional media will keep the government accountable and shine a light on bad governance, corruption and social injustice. Which is why the Government supports, protects and encourages a professional media.

It is for these reasons that we created a Secretariat of State for Social Communications that delivers media training and provides development grants to the media in Timor-Leste. The Secretariat also has the important role to protect and defend a free press in Timor-Leste.

And at the request of the press in Timor-Leste, the Government developed the 2014 Press Law that established the Press Council, composed of senior media people and legal experts, which provides further protections for the media in our country.

According to the 2017 World Press Freedom Index, Timor-Leste has the freest press in South East Asia. We are the only country in our region to be ranked in the top 100 of the 180 nations in the index.

Members of the press
Ladies and gentlemen

The Timor-Leste Government is a great supporter of the media.

And we are aware that press freedom is not 'free' - professional journalism costs money. Investigative journalism costs money.

In this digital age it is becoming harder for traditional media businesses to remain profitable. The reality is that many people today get their news from the internet and social media platforms like Facebook and blogs. For traditional journalism to compete – and to prosper – it must build the confidence of the people. It must provide quality and seek truth.

It has been said that it will be great journalism that saves journalism and I agree.

We must ensure that the media upholds the highest standards - it must also hold itself to the same standards that it holds others.

This means that the media must avoid manipulation; it must verify sources and credentials; it must not print rumours as fact; and it must reject 'fake news'.

Fake news, which is deliberate misinformation that is presented as serious journalism, is a threat to the media and a threat to democracy.

Regrettably, both in Timor-Leste and around the world, we are seeing a rise in fake news.

In recent elections around the world, and particularly in the United States, we have seen terrible cases of fake news that have been highly defamatory and that have harmed the reputation of leading political figures.

This fake news and malicious defamation is fuelling a breakdown in trust that constitutes a threat to democracy.

Regrettably, the laws of defamation are proving ineffective. This is not only because bringing a civil case for defamation is both costly and time-consuming, it is because these legal cases can only be effective when they are against those that have the funds to pay for any damages a court may award.

In Timor-Leste, we protect the reputation of individuals through our Constitution.

Section 36 of our Constitution provides that every individual has the right to honour, good record and reputation and the protection of his or her public image and privacy.

And so, the freedom of the press must be balanced against protection from defamation. This is standard across the world's democracies and helps to protect not only the reputation of individuals but the institution of the media itself.

That is why it is more important than ever that we have a free of costs! Professional and diligent media that is responsible and accountable.

We are making progress but we still have a long way to go. It will take time for us to strengthen our media institutions and organisations and attract the best and brightest to become reporters and journalists. It will also take time to find the right balance between Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press and the protection of our other fundamental rights like Privacy and Honour.

The Press Council of Timor-Leste has an important role to play here to uphold the standards and professionalism of our media.

The Government applauds the efforts of the Press Council to strengthen the professionalism of the media and build a robust industry more in line with international best practise.

We congratulate the Press Council on its first anniversary and look forward to continuing to work together to protect and strengthen the media – the future of our democracy and the development of our nation depends upon it.

Members of the Press
Ladies and Gentlemen

The theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day, Critical Minds for Critical Times, reminds us all that we live in a time of global transition.

We are seeing shifts in power and wealth both within and between nations and regions. We are seeing the economic and political emergence of the developing world, while some countries are still being left behind. And while globalisation and technology are transforming societies we also know that the benefits are not being shared fairly.

Now, more than ever, we need critical minds and a free press to speak the truth about the world we live in.

And in Timor-Leste, we need a quality press with integrity and professional ethics to work together with us to consolidate our democracy and support the development of our nation and contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16, which is Peace and Stability in Timor-Leste.

In closing, I invite us all to bow our heads in remembrance of all journalists who lost their lives in Timor-Leste throughout the years of our liberation struggle, and to all journalists who even today, are losing their lives in their efforts to tell the truth to the World.

Thank you.

Hamutuk ita bele, Ida ba Hotu-Hotu, Hotu-Hotu ba Ida.

10 May 2017
Dr Rui Maria de Araújo