



**P R I M E
M I N I S T E R**

SPEECH BY

HIS EXCELLENCY PRIME MINISTER

KAY RALA XANANA GUSMÃO

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE 25th ANNIVERSARY OF INTERFET'S
ARRIVAL IN TIMOR-LESTE**

Díli, Timor-Leste
13 September 2024

H.E. President José Ramos-Horta

The Hon. Penny Wensley

The Hon. Sir Peter Cosgrove

Mr. Tamrat Samuel

MAJGEN Mick Smith (Retd)

Professor David Kilcullen

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with gratitude, respect and hope that I join in the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the deployment of INTERFET to Timor-Leste.

Today is a celebration of the past, and a time for reflection.

INTERFET's arrival was a moment in history that shaped our future and continues to inspire global peacekeeping efforts.

For our young people here today, those not even born in 1999, when these historic events occurred, I hope you gain an understanding and appreciation of the bravery of the Timorese people, and of the commitment of our international friends who helped secure our independence.

INTERFET was welcomed in Timor-Leste with tears of relief.

Decades of resistance in our homeland, persistent diplomacy at the United Nations, and an economic crisis in Indonesia, culminated in our vote for independence.

Tragically, the result of exercising our right for self-determination, for independence, was met with violence.

The United Nations sent a multinational force in response to the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation – the International Force East Timor, known as INTERFET.

The success of INTERFET shows what can be achieved when we put international peace, stability, and human rights ahead of political interests.

INTERFET's success is a potent reminder of the need for collective action in the face of suffering and injustice.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Our nation, once an improbable dream, is now a vibrant democratic and independent country.

But our road to independence was long and fraught.

We were a colony of Portugal for five centuries. It was not until April 1974, when the regime in Portugal was overthrown in a peaceful coup known as the Carnation Revolution, that a pathway to freedom opened for us.

The new government began a process of decolonisation, raising the prospect of Portuguese Timor becoming independent.

On 28 November 1975, we declared our independence.

Nine days later, Indonesia invaded.

For the next 24 years, we resisted. We waged a relentless struggle for independence.

Around 200,000 of our people lost their lives, and countless more were displaced.

Despite the brutality of occupation and war, our people showed incredible dignity and resilience.

We stood strong and united in the face of terror and made remarkable sacrifices as we faced great adversity and deprivation.

Despite the overwhelming odds, our people never lost hope that one day, we would be free.

We understood that we could not win this battle by relying on the military front alone.

Our guerrilla army was small and not equipped with modern and sophisticated weapons and ammunition.

Our occupier was one of the most populous countries in the world.

Supported by the West with weapons, ammunition, tanks, aircraft and military training.

The Timorese guerrilla fighters did not receive any military help from outside.

But we did have non-military help. We were supported by clandestine and diplomatic campaigns.

The clandestine front kept the flame of independence alive. It was more than just a support network.

Members of the clandestine front passed critical information about Indonesian military activities and organised resources for the resistance.

Women played a key role, acting as couriers, intelligence gatherers, leaders and protectors of our national identity.

Young activists, particularly students, took the lead in mobilising internationally, organising protests and building global awareness of our plight.

Together, they exposed the realities of the occupation to the world, revealing the atrocities we endured.

They took our campaign to Indonesia.

Many Indonesians faced the same oppression as us.

They were not our enemy.

We had a common enemy, and that was the military dictatorship.

We built strong links of solidarity with the pro-democracy movement inside Indonesia.

We organised demonstrations to support our common cause.

The clandestine front was instrumental in uniting the international community in support of our independence.

The diplomatic campaign was equally important.

It was led by our President Dr José Ramos-Horta, who travelled the world and pounded the corridors of the United Nations in New York.

The diplomatic campaign constantly reminded the world of the struggle of the Timorese people.

It kept the fate of Timor-Leste on the United Nations agenda and worked with international solidarity networks to keep Timor-Leste in the news.

Often the clandestine and diplomatic fronts worked together.

For example, in 1991, the international community was given undeniable proof of our suffering when video footage of the Santa Cruz massacre on 12 November was broadcast around the world.

Our clandestine front worked together with Max Sthal to help him retrieve the video and get it out of the country, and once it was broadcast, our diplomatic front used the confronting footage to garner support for our cause.

Despite the shocking images that emerged and the matter being raised at the United Nations and in other international forums, it was another eight years before the tide turned.

When Indonesia was weakened by the Asian financial crisis in 1997, followed by the collapse of President Suharto's dictatorship, the possibility of a referendum for our independence came into view.

Many of you here today will recall the events of 30 August 1999, when despite widespread terror and intimidation by militias, almost 95% of our registered voters turned out to vote in the referendum.

78.5% voted in favour of independence, an overwhelming demonstration of our people's unwavering desire for freedom.

This turnout and result showed the world the unparalleled bravery and determination of the Timorese people.

We knew the risks involved, the potential repercussions, but we chose to exercise our right to self-determination.

Our courage was rooted in the belief that one day, our nation would stand free and independent.

On 4 September 1999, when the results were announced, our hearts were filled with joy.

But it was a cautious joy, for we knew that the militias were still on the ground.

And, as history has recorded, what followed was a brutal and systematic campaign of violence that left our country in ruins.

Our people were left alone, holding on to the hope that the international community would not turn a blind eye to our plight.

Our faith in humanity was tested, but we remained resilient.

During this time, I made one of the most difficult decisions of my life.

Despite knowing that violence might erupt, I instructed our armed forces, FALINTIL, to remain in their cantonments.

This decision, though incredibly painful for our fighters, was crucial to ensuring that the militias could not claim there was a civil war in our country.

We needed to show the world that it was the actions of the militias, not our own, causing bloodshed.

Following the referendum, the militia unleashed a campaign of violent retribution.

Our people, who had already suffered so much, were brutally murdered, their homes burnt to the ground.

Our hospitals, schools, bridges, water and electricity systems were destroyed.

The world was outraged.

People across the world organised demonstrations and lobbied their governments to take action.

Finally, the international community responded. With Indonesian approval, on 15 September 1999, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1264, calling for the establishment of a multinational force to restore peace and stability in Timor-Leste.

The result was the formation of INTERFET, a coalition of 22 countries that arrived on our shores on 20 September 1999, with over 11,000 personnel at its peak.

It was a profound moment. Our regional neighbours, including Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines, played leading roles in this mission, which marked a turning point in our fight for freedom.

I want to pay particular tribute to the leadership of Major General Peter Cosgrove, who led INTERFET with humility, wisdom, and a deep commitment to our people.

His ability to listen, to work collaboratively with the Timorese, and guide the mission was instrumental to its success.

I am honoured to call him a friend, and it is heartening to see him here again in Timor-Leste.

When INTERFET arrived, our country was in ruins.

70% of our infrastructure had been destroyed, homes abandoned, and countless lives shattered.

The arrival of INTERFET was a beacon of hope.

The relief and joy our people felt when INTERFET arrived was immeasurable.

INTERFET's contribution to helping put an end to the violence in our country is remembered with deep gratitude by all Timorese.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

As we celebrate INTERFET's arrival in Timor-Leste 25 years ago, we must not forget the invaluable role played by our own liberation force, FALINTIL.

The discipline of our brave soldiers, who obeyed my order to hold their positions during the aftermath of the referendum was extraordinary.

They fought for our freedom long before INTERFET arrived, and many of them paid the ultimate price in the quest for independence.

The sacrifices of FALINTIL and their unwavering commitment to our cause embody the spirit of our nation.

Many of our fighters gave their lives for our freedom, and those who survived faced the challenge of rebuilding their lives in a country ravaged by war.

Many members of FALINTIL who fought for our freedom did not live to see the peaceful and democratic Timor-Leste that exists today.

Their stories and their sacrifices must never be forgotten.

Our people are deeply committed to preserving these memories.

Similarly, we honour and respect the brave members of INTERFET who delivered our freedom.

In Oe-Cusse, there is a child named "INTERFET" as a tribute to the forces that helped liberate us.

We now have a museum dedicated to honouring the soldiers and international friends who stood with us in our darkest hour.

I hope you all have the opportunity to visit the Balibo Fort Veterans' Museum, which documents the resilience of our people and the solidarity of our friends at this critical time.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

As we stand here today, commemorating the role of INTERFET in our history, we must also remember that the struggle for freedom and peace continues in other parts of the world.

Countries such as Western Sahara are still denied their right to self-determination.

Conflicts rage in Sudan, Ukraine, Gaza, Afghanistan, and many other regions.

It is our duty to support these people in their fight for peace, justice, and dignity.

As we reflect on INTERFET's success, we must recognise that its legacy extends far beyond Timor-Leste.

INTERFET is a model for peacekeeping operations around the world.

Its success was no accident — it was the result of strong political commitment, the courage to correct past mistakes, close cooperation with local communities, and the unified support of the international community.

In any peacekeeping effort, political will is paramount.

The international community must be prepared to act swiftly and decisively, as it did in Timor-Leste, to prevent further loss of life and destruction.

INTERFET's success was made possible by the unified support of the global community.

Nations from around the world came together, setting aside political differences to uphold human dignity and international law.

This spirit of solidarity is essential to the success of any peacekeeping mission.

Equally important is the willingness to engage with and listen to the local population.

INTERFET under the leadership of Sir Peter Cosgrove worked closely with our communities, respecting their needs and aspirations.

This collaboration ensured that peacekeeping efforts were effective and sustainable.

The lessons of INTERFET are more relevant than ever in this troubled world.

The international community must remain steadfast in its commitment to peace, justice, and the protection of human rights.

Timor-Leste and INTERFET are proof that when the world acts with courage and compassion, peace prevails.

Thank you very much.
Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão