



PRIME
MINISTER

**ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRIME MINISTER
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**From War to Peace and Sustainable Development: A Lesson for the
World**

The Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege for me to be here today at Columbia University's Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies.

I am grateful for the honourable invitation to address this distinguished audience. I confess that nothing could be more rewarding than, during my trip to New York to participate in the United Nations General Assembly, having the opportunity to engage with this young, intelligent, and curious audience.

These young people, who hold in their hands – or better, in their minds – the responsibility of contributing to a future of peace and development, are a beacon of hope for our shared future. This is, in fact, the central theme dominating the agenda of this intense week at the United Nations headquarters.

I will begin by highlighting the importance of this Institute of War and Peace Studies, founded in the 1950s, to promote understanding of the “*disastrous consequences of war on the spiritual, intellectual, and material progress of humankind*”.

At the time of the Institute's creation, as you know, we were in the aftermath of World War II.

The UN had been established a few years earlier, and the world, still with the vivid memory of the atrocities of war, was imbued with a sense of confidence that never again, at any time, would such cruelties be repeated in global history.

We speak of the Holocaust and persecuted groups, we speak of disease, famine, and extreme poverty due to war, we speak of massacres and all kinds of human rights abuses, we speak of millions of displaced people, and even of the dropping of atomic bombs.

The scars of war have lingered in history. Yet, human beings seem incapable of avoiding scenarios of hatred, conflict, and injustice that may once again lead to war.

What I propose to you today is not a lesson, but rather a reflection.

A reflection on how a people, the people of Timor-Leste, after five centuries of colonisation and 24 years of war, managed to emancipate themselves and choose a path of peace, democracy, and development.

A reflection on how peace is an indispensable condition in any process of sustainable development. And a reflection on the importance of multilateralism in building a peaceful and developed world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by reminding you that Timor-Leste is a half-island nation located between Asia and the Pacific, more precisely between the Indonesian archipelago and the vast Australian continent.

The Timorese people possess a unique indigenous identity with cultural and Christian influences, making us one of the most Catholic countries in the entire world, and leading us to adopt a completely distinctive language in the region, Portuguese, as one of our two official languages. With our other official language being Tetum, our indigenous lingua franca.

We have ancestral traits that blended with new cultures, customs, and traditions; and an independent nature that, despite being suppressed by colonial power, grew into an unstoppable will, which included many anti-colonial rebellions across generations.

And so, while the world divided into two poles to dispute global hegemony during the Cold War, in Timor-Leste this collective sense of belonging to an ideal of freedom was growing.

In the 1960s, Timor, like many other colonies, came under the radar of the UN and of the decolonisation movements, being considered a "Non-Self-Governing Territory under Portuguese administration".

And while the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974, as a result the Carnation Revolution, strengthened our conviction that

we were the masters of our own destiny, the Cold War era in which we were living stubbornly stole that destiny from us.

The regional players of the time – from the US, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand – did not believe in the viability of our independence, and believed that annexation by Indonesia would be the best solution for world peace.

Although in Timor we dreamt of decolonisation, creating political associations – until then prohibited – and holding discussions about future governance structures and programs, the strategic interests, especially of Indonesia and Australia, were to sow division among our political groups and our young people, inevitably leading to a brief civil war that further fostered the belief in our supposed unviability.

I recall that this period coincided with the US loss in the Vietnam War, sparking fears of the expansion of socialist regimes. Moreover, our very small country had been marked as possessing oil reserves.

Nevertheless, on 28 November 1975, we had the courage to unilaterally declare our independence. Nine days later, however, we were invaded by Indonesia.

It was a brutal invasion, with heavy weaponry and tens of thousands of soldiers, shocking a defenceless population and met with indifference by the international community.

But the Indonesian military was also taken by surprise, as they did not expect a resilient and organised resistance that was prepared to die for freedom.

We had to endure 24 years of sacrifice that cost the lives of more than a third of our population. We experienced the hardships of war – its violence, famine, disease, and a series of unimaginable abuses.

However, this occupation would not have lasted 24 years if Western countries had not supplied weapons, tanks, planes, and training to Indonesian officers to improve their combat capacity and crush the resistance of the small Timorese guerrilla army.

And it would not have lasted 24 years if the international community had not ignored our suffering, while at the same time Indonesia and Australia negotiated a resource sharing agreement within our territory to divide the valuable oil resources lying beneath our sea.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear Students,

I am talking about Timor between the 70s and 90s of the 20th century, but I invite you to reflect on how many countries today, in the middle of the 21st century, find themselves in a similar situation. How many countries are isolated and ignored, with their people suffering, while the economic and geostrategic interests of powerful nations prevail, indifferent to this suffering?

For us, during our period of occupation, it was essential to reflect on the world with critical thinking, understanding that we were victims of a Western ideal of superiority and a bipolar power model. This was a time when the Global South was voiceless and powerless against the hegemony of the North.

In 1983, the warring parties agreed to a ceasefire, which lasted only six months. In the negotiations at this time, we advocated a peaceful solution and presented our 'Peace Plan' to the Indonesian government. In this "Peace Plan", we called for more active involvement from the United Nations, and for Portugal (the administering power) and Indonesia (the occupying power) to begin seriously negotiating a referendum for the Timorese to decide their own future.

In 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Timorese, despite being exhausted, began to regain hope in the much-heralded "New World Order".

The 1990s was finally a turning point for the future of Timor.

This was because our situation was gaining international visibility, due to the unfortunate coincidence of a massacre of nearly three hundred young Timorese who united in a peaceful demonstration – the Santa Cruz Massacre of 1991 – which was filmed by journalist Max Stahl, who managed to get the footage out of the country.

Further, another country that has been occupied for almost five decades, Western Sahara, had succeeded in 1991 in having

the UN Security Council to establish a United Nations Mission for a Referendum.

As you can imagine, the prospect of a referendum for a country in a situation very similar to ours filled us with hope, as we believed our time would come.

Let me make a side note to explain that the referendum process in Western Sahara, which was due to take place in 1992, ended up being postponed by a UN decision not to proceed due to the principle that "*it was impossible to end the violence*". And today, 32 years later, Western Sahara remains devastated by violence and occupation, while the international community remains dormant.

It is essential to continue appealing for compliance with international law, for Western Sahara, Ukraine, Palestine, and many other countries in conflict.

Multilateralism has proven that it can find solutions for peace and stability in the world. It is necessary to revive this memory and restore the lost trust.

I recall that it was in the decade of the rise of multilateralism that the European Union was formally born, and that democracies expanded, also through processes of negotiation and technical assistance. We can find good examples from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, including the normalisation of relations between Iraq and Kuwait, the autonomy plan for Gaza and the West Bank, Namibia's independence, and the end of apartheid in South Africa.

We can also underline that Indonesia's democratic transition began, leading to Timor-Leste's right to vote for independence.

On 30 August 1999, despite intimidation and violence that almost led to the postponement of our referendum – something we did not accept, given the example of Western Sahara – the Timorese people bravely and overwhelmingly voted for their right to freedom and independence.

And while Timor's independence is owed to the resistance and bravery of its people, it is also, in a way, a result of greater commitment of the international community.

Thanks to this period of history - the period of multilateralism - marked by greater diplomacy in resolving crises and conflicts, in contrast to a paradigm of distrust, imposition, and threat.

This year, we celebrated the 25th anniversary of this vote, which we call the "Popular Consultation".

While we are eternally grateful to the UN, Portugal, and Indonesia for negotiating the process, and to the international community for coming together to realise Timor's dream, including the subsequent peacekeeping and transitional administration, it seems fair to say that the international community should also be grateful to Timor-Leste for this international triumph.

Our process demonstrated the importance of international law and demonstrated the weight of the United Nations when there is

serious commitment, while proving that multilateralism is the solution. Most importantly, Timor-Leste's success is the success of dialogue and negotiation – the only valid tools for conflict resolution.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Make no mistake if you think that this meant the immediate start of peace and tranquillity for our people. Rebuilding a country after conflict demands almost as many sacrifices as emerging from it.

Timor-Leste had to rise literally from the ashes. We did not know what it meant to be a State with the Rule of Law, we had no institutions, no infrastructure, and no human or financial resources capable of facilitating this transition process.

We were a suffering and weary people, scarred by violence, poor, and perhaps under the illusion that, once independence was achieved, everyone's life would improve "overnight".

Alas, no! Building a State takes years, or even decades. Consolidating peace in a poor and fragile country like ours is like caring for a newborn baby.

We immediately began, as a national priority, a process of external reconciliation with neighbouring Indonesia, and internal reconciliation among Timorese who had been targets of divisive

tactics. Still, it was not long before our weaknesses outweighed the joys of independence.

We experienced cyclic violent crises in the country between 2003 and 2007. During this period, our country was again subjected to violence, death, and destruction, including disputes between two key institutions necessary for securing the country's peace and stability: the police forces and the national defence forces.

We again had thousands of internally displaced people and fear in the eyes of women and children. And we faced international pressure, which on the one hand provided significant financial resources and technical assistance, while on the other continuing to fail to understand the true causes of our instability.

The division imposed in previous decades had not been eradicated. The misery of a people marked by years of conflict was now unbearable, as the ideal of freedom had been achieved, but the people remained trapped by hardship and the injustice of poverty.

While we were making great progress in reconciliation with our Indonesian neighbours – because we understood that we could not move forward with the nation-building process with feelings of hatred, distrust, and vengeance towards our closest neighbour – internal reconciliation between Timorese sisters and brothers was still lacking.

Therefore, we had to learn to deal with the main fragility of our State, which was the inability to address the real causes of our problems in a sustainable way.

We had to impose a new political stance within the institutions, seeking inclusive and lasting solutions together, placing the collective interest above any other interest.

And we had to restore dignity to those who made countless sacrifices for the cause of independence, including our veterans and the most vulnerable groups in our society, the present-day victims of the decades of conflict.

And, of course, we had to review internal policies, including our relationship with donors and the international community, recognising that only we intrinsically knew our reality, to define the solution to our problems ourselves.

In this sense, we began a profound reform process across our institutions of State, including our police and armed forces, not only focusing on reconciling the differences that kept them at odds but also correcting the mistakes made in their capacity-building and training.

The discourse of development partners also changed. If initially we were at risk of becoming a failed State, later we were accused of “buying peace”.

I say, no one knows their challenges better than those directly affected. To walk the path to peace, everyone who is part of the problem must be involved and feel part of the solution.

In 2009, after much internal effort in peacebuilding and State institution-building, we adopted the national slogan, embraced by all: “Goodbye Conflict, Welcome Development”.

And here we are, fifteen years later, transitioning towards sustainable development, supported by a vibrant, peaceful, and tolerant democracy.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During this process of navigating international aid to our country, we participated in many international meetings and forums promoted by Development Partners, meeting many nations that, like us, recognised themselves as fragile or conflict-affected states.

At one such meeting on the “effectiveness of international aid”, six of these countries expressed interest in learning more about our history of reconciliation and State-building.

In 2010, we invited them to Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, to share perspectives and experiences. And it was from this meeting in Dili, with representatives from Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Haiti and the Ivory Coast that the intergovernmental organisation we call the g7+ was born.

And let me explain: g7 (lowercase 'g'), in contrast to the G7 (uppercase 'G'). That is, the world's most fragile group in contrast to the world's strongest group. The "plus" was added later because other countries, now numbering 20, wanted to join this group.

Since then, we have been advocating dialogue and peaceful political actions in the region and the world, intending to share experiences and promote State-building, reconciliation, and prosperity in this unequal world, under a fundamental principle: that nothing should be decided about us, without us!

This group, now with observer status at the UN, contributed significantly to the inclusion of SDG16 in the Global 2030 Agenda, as without peace and strong institutions, it is nearly impossible to achieve the other SDGs.

However, many of "our" countries have not yet experienced their future of peace, as is the case with Yemen, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, and Haiti. These countries, like many others, including Myanmar, our Southeast Asian neighbour, continue to have their people trapped in conflict, suffering, and extreme poverty.

Again, I invite you to reflect: what is missing for these peoples to break free from the conflict trap?

In many of these cases, Peacekeeping Missions have been established for decades. But what are they keeping? Certainly not peace.

On the other hand, we attend global peace summits, as happened this year in support of Ukraine, and instead of discussing conditions for a ceasefire, we discussed solutions to keep the fire burning. There will be no peace where the conflicting parties do not sit down to negotiate, honestly, solutions for peace, rather than ammunition for war.

While at the United Nations and other international forums we discuss agendas for a future of peace and development – now almost in the final stretch to achieve the SDGs by 2030 – there are world leaders who discuss peace agreements over lunch and sign arms deals over dinner.

Until there is a change in mentality, in which war does not build peace, and until there is reflection on the causes of most conflicts in fragile countries – often related to hegemonic policies of powerful nations and/or their multinational corporations – it is futile to believe in a future of sustainable development.

I repeat, peace is an indispensable condition for development!

And peace often begins with small, even personal, commitments. It is here at the university, with so many talented young people, that this needs to be instilled, and it is through young people that we can begin to make a difference.

We need peace to fight poverty, inequality, and also climate change, a new challenge that threatens the survival of us all, particularly Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

As if no one had yet realised that in today's interdependent world, no one is safe until we are all safe!

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before concluding, I cannot fail to mention some of the steps we have taken towards sustainable development in Timor-Leste.

We have established a system of democratic governance that guarantees free access to education and healthcare, although these remain “eternal” challenges for the country, as greater quality needs to be ensured.

We have developed policies to combat inequality and promote inclusion, with a particular focus on women, children and young people, people with disabilities, and the elderly, as well as, of course, our veterans.

We have invested in rebuilding the country's basic infrastructure, without which social and economic sectors cannot develop. For example, access to electricity, which was once limited to the capital, is now available across the entire country. By the end of the year, we plan to install a fibre-optic submarine cable, crucial for socio-economic development.

We have built systems and mechanisms for the effectiveness and transparency of public administration and financial management, and we have begun a decentralisation process.

We are now beginning to develop the nation's productive sectors, also investing in the private sector for non-oil economic diversification.

However, we are aware that to develop our country, we still have much, much to do, including creating jobs for our young people, as 65% of our population is under 30 years old.

Meanwhile, also as a matter of national sovereignty, we prioritised the establishment of permanent maritime boundaries with our neighbours, Australia and Indonesia.

While we are still at the start of negotiations with Indonesia, with Australia we once again turned to international law to resolve our years-long dispute over the boundary line.

Timor-Leste was the first country to initiate the compulsory conciliation process under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to achieve, through peaceful and rules-based means, our right to sovereignty over our sea. This achievement also helped strengthen friendship and cooperation with this friendly country, Australia.

As I mentioned, we have just celebrated the 25th anniversary of the referendum that ultimately brought us sovereignty; now it is time to defend that sovereignty.

As a Small Island Developing State, Timor-Leste is dealing with climate change and its many impacts, such as rising sea

levels, ocean acidification, and other threats to the marine environment.

We are therefore committed to being part of the international management of the oceans for the protection and preservation of the marine environment.

Timor-Leste is located in the centre of the Coral Triangle region, one of the world's richest areas of marine biodiversity. Timor-Leste's location is central to the conservation of marine biodiversity in the region, and studies have identified Ataúro Island, in particular, as one of the world's most biodiverse marine locations.

Protecting our marine biodiversity involves a great responsibility, which the Timorese people bear with honour and readily assume. Moreover, being located in a semi-enclosed sea, Timor-Leste seeks cooperation in the protection and preservation of the marine environment and marine scientific research.

Over the coming months, Timor-Leste will approve its first National Blue Economy Policy, which includes important and innovative political and legislative measures that will shape our national ocean governance policy for the future, ensuring that my generation will leave behind a resilient and healthy ocean for those who follow us.

Now that you know a bit more about our history, I invite you to come and experience the beauty of our people and our country.

You can admire the most incredible corals and swim with dolphins, or even with the incredible pygmy blue whales that use our coastline as part of their migratory route.

In Timor-Leste, those who come in peace are welcome.

Peace in all its dimensions – political, economic, social, and environmental – is what we wish for all places in the world, leaving no one behind.

Thank you very much.

Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão