



PRIME
MINISTER

**SPEECH BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRIME MINISTER
KAY RALA XANANA GUSMÃO**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE COMMEMORATION OF
THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FORESTS**

“FORESTS AND FOOD”

Balak Area, Ai Teas Suco
Municipality of Manatuto

21 March 2025

Honourable Members of the Government
Honourable President of the Municipal Authority of Manatuto
Suco and Hamlet Chiefs
“Katuas Lia Nain”

Community of the Manatuto Administrative Post, and in particular, of
the Ai Teas Suco,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Girls and Boys,

It is a great pleasure to be here today celebrating the International Day
of Forests with this extraordinary community in Manatuto.

The International Day of Forests, established by the United Nations
General Assembly in 2012, serves as a reminder of the importance of
conserving forests and their invaluable contribution to the health of our
planet, our communities, and people worldwide.

This year’s theme is "Forests and Food". In Timor-Leste, we say "*Ai-
laran no Ai-han*" because the relationship between forests and food security
– between forests, nutrition, and community livelihoods – is inseparable.

In addition to being a source of food, forests are home to diverse
ecosystems and species (animals, plants, and insects) that form part of our
precious biodiversity.

Furthermore, forests regulate the climate by capturing carbon dioxide
and influencing rainfall patterns, purifying the air we breathe, cleansing the
water we drink, and protecting our watersheds. In short, forests safeguard
our health and our very existence!

Unfortunately, over the years Timor-Leste has been losing its native
forests, such as teakwood, mahogany, and sandalwood, which harms
wildlife and reduces food sources in the country.

It is therefore imperative that we act consistently to protect our national forest areas, which cover approximately 50% of the country's landmass, so that the forestry sector can continue to provide sustainable food and income for the Timorese people while ensuring ecological balance.

In our country, we know that improved forest management can contribute to economic diversification. The timber industry, agroforestry services, and ecotourism stimulate job creation and income generation. However, it is essential for communities reliant on these sectors to understand that the forest is a living resource that can perish if not properly protected.

It is we, human beings, who contribute to the degradation of our forests – whether through unregulated firewood harvesting, uncontrolled agricultural and pastureland expansion, or institutional weaknesses in managing and regulating forested areas.

For this reason, the Government is committed to strengthening institutional mechanisms, improving forest management systems, and promoting reforestation and sustainable practices in this sector.

Our natural resources are our greatest wealth. Neglecting these resources means neglecting our people, our children, and our youth – it means failing to secure a future for the coming generations.

Ladies and Gentlemen
Community of Manatuto,

I humbly urge you to contribute to the Government's efforts to safeguard and protect our natural resources. Respecting nature, its cycles, and its species is not only about protecting the environment; it is about protecting our present and future lives.

We all have a duty to act in defence of what belongs to us and sustains us. Forestry practices must be sustainable, which means that we must effectively combat illegal deforestation.

Each of us can implement small initiatives that contribute to the health of our forests: planting a tree or refraining from irresponsibly destroying one ("*arbiru dei*"); educating our children, families, and neighbours about the importance of nature; reducing waste and collecting litter; keeping our rivers and lakes clean and preserving our watersheds.

I must also highlight the importance of mangrove forests, which exist at the interface between our land and maritime areas and harbour other wonders of biodiversity.

Mangrove forests support a rich variety of plant and animal species and serve as feeding and breeding grounds for numerous marine species, including fish, molluscs, and crustaceans. Additionally, these forests are crucial for coastal protection, acting as natural barriers against storms and wave impacts, preventing coastal erosion, and mitigating floods.

As forests, mangroves also capture and store carbon, helping combat climate change. Moreover, they provide a vital source of food and income for coastal communities.

Preserving mangrove forests is essential for the ecological and economic well-being of the planet. Coastal communities can be the primary guardians of this vital resource that sustains biodiversity.

Rehabilitating mangrove areas along our coasts is a key commitment of our government, particularly as part of the promotion of the Blue Economy.

The interconnectivity between land and sea – the interdependence between terrestrial and marine ecosystems – is critical for the health of the global ecosystem. The ocean is a pillar of Earth's life-support system,

including forests. That is why it is often said that "without blue, there is no green," or that without the ocean, life cannot exist.

To conclude, on this International Day of Forests, I hope that everyone feels inspired to protect and conserve this natural resource that is so essential to the Timorese people.

Our collective effort, commitment, and responsibility will determine a sustainable future.

Let us, please, leave our children with a healthy forest. Let us leave behind a green world where both Timorese people and nature can thrive in harmony.

Thank you very much.

Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão