



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

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

**ON THE OCCASION OF  
THE DILI INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
“NAVIGATING CHALLENGES: LAW OF THE SEA AND MARITIME DISPUTE  
SETTLEMENT”**

Dili, Timor-Leste

16 May 2025

**Excellency, Judge Heidar, President of the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea,**

**Excellencies,**

**Members of the Diplomatic Corps,**

**Distinguished guests,**

**Participants from around the world,**

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

Thank you all for joining us in Timor-Leste and participating in this dialogue on navigating challenges: the law of the sea and maritime dispute settlement.

We are here because we understand how critical the ocean is to humanity and its future.

The ocean brings us together. It connects nations and peoples. It fosters cultural understanding, people-to-people relations and the exchange of traditions, languages and customs among the world's diverse communities.

The Blue Economy drives global economic growth, trade and job creation. It includes offshore oil and gas, container shipping, shipbuilding and repair, marine tourism, port activities and renewable energy.

In Timor-Leste, a Small Island Developing State, the ocean is central to our cultural identity. It supports food security, employment and our economic development.

It is also the foundation of life on earth. The ocean holds extraordinary biodiversity and great mystery. It is essential to the survival and wellbeing of future generations, especially as the impacts of climate change worsen.

Because of this, it is essential that nations work together to promote unity, a sense of common purpose and peace.

But this has proved challenging for the community of nations and today ocean governance presents some of the most pressing security, economic and geopolitical issues of our time.

The challenges are significant — control of resources, the movement of people and goods, navigation rights, maritime security, biodiversity protection, climate change and, of course, sovereignty.

Some of the world's most entrenched disputes are over maritime boundaries.

There are more than two hundred unresolved maritime boundary disputes in the world and these disputes increase geostrategic tension and threaten peace and stability.

These rising tensions are happening during a period of global disruption and disorder. We are witnessing the weakening of the international legal, economic and trading systems built after the Second World War.

This is damaging global trust, cooperation and development.

That is why now, more than ever, we must work to uphold international law and build global solidarity.

For the Timorese, respect for international law is deeply ingrained. After the invasion of our country, we placed our hope in international law to end the illegal occupation.

As I led our armed resistance in the mountains and valleys of Timor, we knew we could not defeat the Indonesian army through force.

But we kept the struggle in our country alive to create a foundation for international diplomacy and the application of international law.

And it was thanks to international law that we were able to achieve self-determination for our people.

We know that international law gives even the smallest nations a voice. It promises that rights and dignity can be protected without resort to violence.

That is why Timor-Leste again turned to international law to defend our sovereign rights and resolve our maritime boundaries with Australia.

Through diplomacy and dialogue, we concluded the first maritime boundary treaty under the Compulsory Conciliation mechanism of UNCLOS.

We know as well as any nation that international law is not perfect, that the international system has its shortcomings.

But international relations are conducted through the language of law. Law provides the framework for peaceful dispute resolution, the prevention of aggression and the protection of rights and sovereignty — for all States, no matter their size or power.

At a time when international law is under great pressure, Timor-Leste feels a deep obligation to stand in its defence.

That is the purpose of this conference — to support dialogue and cooperation, and to affirm the principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

It is also an opportunity to discuss peaceful mechanisms to resolve maritime disputes, including Compulsory Conciliation, which we know from our experience can succeed even in the most difficult of cases.

Yesterday, for the first time since the Conciliation, we brought together the participants in that process — the agents, the Chair and the Commissioners, as well as the legal representatives of both countries.

Together, they emphasised the power of dialogue and structured negotiation to bridge divides and resolve maritime disputes.

We believe that our experience may be of interest to others facing longstanding maritime boundary issues.

Our discussions so far have also been deeply enriched by the participants in this conference, including representatives from the Pacific, ASEAN, the CPLP and g7+ group of nations, along with leading academics, policy practitioners and legal experts.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we know, the law of the sea covers more than maritime boundaries.

It includes a broad range of ocean governance matters — the protection of the marine environment, sustainable resource use, shipping and navigation, and now, through the High Seas Treaty, the conservation of biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

When UNCLOS was adopted in 1982, we had not yet fully grasped the impact of human activity on the oceans.

Climate change had not yet begun to accelerate ocean acidification or raise sea temperatures at today's pace.

Rising seas had not yet reached the doorsteps of Pacific nations.

And the high seas remained untouched — not because of law or restraint, but because they were beyond reach.

But that has changed.

Technology has pushed the frontiers of resource extraction farther and deeper than ever before.

The threats we face — environmental damage, overexploitation, pollution, diversity loss, climate disruption — are real, and they are escalating.

On this second and final day of our conference, I invite you to focus on these emerging challenges.

I hope today's discussions will encourage reflection, dialogue and a renewed commitment to safeguard the oceans that sustain us.

In Timor-Leste, we understand the value of ocean conservation — for biodiversity and for building a sustainable Blue Economy.

Our country is fringed by coral reefs, including on Ataúro Island which has some of the most biodiverse reefs on the planet.

Every year, blue whales travel along our coast and can be seen from our shores.

That is why we are establishing a national marine park around Ataúro Island - which will become a marine protected area of international significance.

We are also building a Marine Education Centre on Ataúro, to educate our people about marine ecosystems and the need for conservation.

We know what must be done. But we cannot do it alone.

Real change requires political will and collective action — from governments, business and civil society.

It must be done.

A few years ago, Small Island Developing States turned to international legal institutions for clarity and accountability, seeking advisory opinions from the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and the International Court of Justice on State obligations in relation to climate change and ocean protection.

The ITLOS advisory opinion was a milestone. For the first time, an international court made clear that States have legal obligations under UNCLOS to prevent, reduce and control greenhouse gas emissions.

This matters deeply to small island and coastal States like Timor-Leste, who contribute the least to climate change but bear its greatest burdens.

Timor-Leste was also proud to co-sponsor the UN resolution led by Vanuatu requesting an advisory opinion from the ICJ.

In our submissions, we joined Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States in calling for climate justice — accountability for those responsible, and remedy for loss and damage.

We await the Court's opinion with great interest.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We now stand on the threshold of a new chapter — the ratification of the High Seas Treaty.

This landmark agreement, adopted in 2023 under UNCLOS, aims to protect marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction — two-thirds of the global ocean — through tools such as marine protected areas, environmental assessments and the benefit-sharing of marine genetic resources.

It is a major step toward more equitable and sustainable ocean governance.

Timor-Leste ratified the Treaty in September last year, shortly after Singapore became the first Southeast Asian country to do so. We congratulate the Deputy Attorney-General of Singapore who was a speaker yesterday.

Ratification of the Treaty will only be the beginning. The task ahead is to implement its provisions effectively — to translate legal principles into conservation outcomes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The ocean is vital to our shared future.

We must make sure it remains a source of connection, not conflict. We must make sure that we turn to dialogue and cooperation to resolve maritime disputes.

And we must protect marine biodiversity for future generations.

I hope that long into the future, Timorese children will still marvel at our coral reefs and witness the blue whales along our shores.

To achieve this, we must act together, with shared purpose and a vision for a nature-positive future.

I hope this conference, and each of you here, contributes to that task — for the good of our common humanity and the planet.

Thank you all for participating in this conference and I hope our international guests carry a piece of our small, beautiful island with you as you return home.

Thank you very much.