



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

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

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE
ASIA-PACIFIC SOLIDARITY CONFERENCE
FOR WESTERN SAHARA IN TIMOR-LESTE**

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Palácio do Governo
Avenida Marginal
Dili, Timor-Leste

Your Excellencies
Dear friends
Ladies and gentlemen
And specially youth,

I know that you are preparing yourself for the future of Timor-Leste. But never forget to look outside, beyond our borders.

It is with great honour and sincere pleasure that I welcome the distinguished participants at this conference, in particular our sisters and brothers from the distant land of Western Sahara.

Distant, yet close to our hearts.

This conference is a historic moment. To gather here, in Southeast Asia, in support of the Sahrawi people's cause is essential to broadening awareness of an issue (specially for the youth) which, regrettably, has had little voice on the international stage.

For this reason, I wish to extend my greetings to all the Asia-Pacific representatives gathered here, and to express my hope that this conference will amplify the voice of the Sahrawi people, and inspire coordinated and meaningful action within your communities.

Let me also congratulate the Timor-Leste NGO Forum (FONGTIL) and civil society groups for organising this Asia-Pacific Solidarity Conference for Western Sahara.

This first meeting in Dili, in solidarity with the Sahrawi people, could not come at a more fitting time.

Tomorrow, Timor-Leste marks the 23rd Anniversary of the Restoration of Independence, following a painful struggle for liberation. Restoration because we declared our independence on 28 November 1975. And 9 days later we were invaded. In the beginning, we tried to confront militarily the Indonesian troops. But because they were receiving weapons from western countries, we lost the war in 1979. In 1980 and 1981 we tried to reorganize ourselves better, with the involvement of the population. With the support of the people, we could reorganize the guerrilla. In 1983, I met with the Indonesian military commander in Timor-Leste, and he told me to surrender. If I did it, I would be promoted to general. I gave him a message to deliver to Jakarta, saying that we were aware of the problem and that to end the war a peaceful solution as needed. They would not kill us, but militarily we would never be able to expel them.

So, the solution was to ask the people: if they wanted integration, we would surrender. We asked for them to convey with UN, Indonesia and Portugal. We waited 16 years. This increased the resilience, the courage, the spirit of sacrifice of the people. When UN decided to organise the referendum in Western Sahara, we said that after them, it would be Palestine and us. In 1992, the referendum was postponed, but we kept our resilience

and determination. In 1999, we refused to postpone the referendum in Timor-Leste, giving as an example the decision about Western Sahara. For this reason, I have a particular connection with Western Sahara.

Last year, in August, your President came to Dili, for the 25th Anniversary of our Referendum. UN SG also came. We conveyed our concerns regarding Western Sahara. I regret to say that international law only applies when some countries are involved.

Later this week, as you are aware, Timor-Leste is hosting the 24th Regional Seminar of the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation (C24).

Hosting this regional seminar is an honour we embrace with a strong sense of responsibility, and we take this opportunity today to reaffirm our commitment to your cause, to the right of peoples to self-determination, through peaceful means, based on international law.

It was 23 years ago that the people of Timor-Leste were finally able to reclaim our destiny — to live in peace, freedom and independence — thanks in large part to the support of the international community.

Timor-Leste therefore stands with Western Sahara in its unwavering pursuit of self-determination and international recognition because few nations understand better than we do what it is like to be subjected to an international order that overlooks the weak and most vulnerable. This is the problem. We

must help with solidarity. MINURSO is still in the country but nothing changes. That's why we must make our voice louder to defend Western Sahara. UN is not always a place of hope, but of desperation.

In my perspective, for this conference, you need to make sure you get some means to make the Saharawi people our voice too.

Our struggle was difficult; we had to think and correct. You must be more active and make your voice louder. The international situation is also complicated. We are a young country; we are trying to learn. We are dealing with people in power that decide everything ignoring international law and the existent international system.

As you know, respect for international law is deeply rooted in the Timorese people, for international law helped us end our illegal occupation.

We believe that international law remains a beacon of hope for other countries and peoples — a safeguard of rights and dignity, a way to prevent arguments ending in violence.

For the people of Timor-Leste, justice was delayed — but it came!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Western Sahara has been occupied for five decades now!

Half a century of violence and repression. Half a century of disappointment with the international system. Half a century of the legacy of colonialism and commercial interests denying the Sahrawi people the right to self-determination.

The international community cannot remain indifferent to the plight of Western Sahara.

When the United Nations Security Council established MINURSO, in 1991, it reignited the hopes of the Timorese that one day our time would come.

And when in 1992 the referendum in Western Sahara was delayed, it served as a warning to us in Timor-Leste not to accept the postponement of the referendum process that would be the sole opportunity to secure our independence.

Tragically, the suffering of the Sahrawi people became a lesson for the Timorese.

Today, we continue to call for the dozens of Security Council Resolutions supporting the Sahrawi people's right to a referendum on self-determination to be implemented.

Our aim is to achieve, through mutual understanding and dialogue between the Polisario Front and Morocco, a peaceful, negotiated solution acceptable to both parties, yet respectful of the will of the Sahrawi people.

May the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, fully embrace the just cause of the Sahrawi people, as Kofi Annan once embraced the Timorese cause.

I hope that today's meeting will be productive, and that international law shall prevail.

It is time to end all forms of colonialism!

Thank you very much.

Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão