



PRESIDÊNCIA DO  
**CONSELHO  
DE MINISTROS**

IX GOVERNO  
CONSTITUCIONAL

GABINETE DO MINISTRO

**Personal Testimony of His Excellency the  
Minister of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers,  
Mr Agio Pereira**

**Australian and Timor-Leste Friendly Cities Conference**

Noble Hall of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation

Dili, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Honourable guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with honour and sincere satisfaction that I share this personal testimony about the friendship between Timor-Leste and Australia – a friendship rooted in geography, history, and solidarity between our peoples.

Timor-Leste and Australia are neighbouring nations. We are separated by only 650 kilometres of sea. However, in reality, the bond that unites us is far greater than the physical distance.

We are united by a shared memory, common experiences, and a mutual desire to build a future based on peace, respect, and collective prosperity.

So, let me speak not only as a member of the Government of Timor-Leste but also as someone who lived in Australia for nearly twenty years, during a pivotal period in our history – and who remains deeply grateful for the support and friendship encountered there.

The history of our relations dates back to World War II. In that dark period, Australian soldiers found support, protection, and companionship among the Timorese people. It is estimated that more than 40,000 Timorese lost their lives during the war, many of them heroically supporting the Australian forces.

This sacrifice marked the start of a unique relationship – one that was not based on strategic interests, but on acts of courage, solidarity, and humanity from both sides.

Distinguished guests,

The bond between our peoples strengthened in 1975, when thousands of Timorese sought refuge in Australia, escaping the violence and repression of the Indonesian occupation.

I lived in Australia from 1980 to 1999, initially in Darwin and later in Sydney. In Darwin, I founded and led the Darwin Fretilin Committee until 1990, and in Sydney, I became the executive director of the East Timor Relief Association – ETRA – an organisation dedicated to humanitarian support for the East Timorese resistance and to mobilising international solidarity, especially in the Asia-Pacific region.

ETRA, as many will remember, published the *Matebian News* bulletin and managed the Timor-Leste Information and Documentation Centre – two tools aimed at giving our people a voice during a period when many tried to silence them.

An extraordinary alliance between the Timorese and Australians defined those years. Friends, neighbours, students, activists, churches, veterans, journalists, politicians and ordinary citizens united in the cause of our liberation. And they did so with generosity, courage and conviction.

This year, 2025, marks 50 years of the Timorese diaspora's presence in Australia - a half-century of stories of resilience, integration, and active contribution to Australian society, all while maintaining a strong link to their homeland.

In 1999, Australia again stood by our side during one of the most challenging moments in our history. Following the independence referendum, our people endured brutal violence. It was in this context that the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) was established, led by Australia and comprising more than 11,000 personnel, over half of whom were Australian.

INTERFET's arrival signified the rebirth of hope. Their mission was far more than a military operation: it was a powerful display of international solidarity and dedication to human rights, justice, and the dignity of peoples. The courage, determination, and compassion shown by all those involved in this mission left an enduring mark on the history of our country and in the hearts of our people.

Timor-Leste remains a clear example of how international cooperation, when organised in a determined, coordinated, and principled manner, can help restore stability and facilitate national reconstruction.

The lessons of INTERFET are more relevant today than ever. We live in a troubled world where respect for human rights, sovereignty, and self-determination continues to be challenged. Timor-Leste demonstrates that peaceful solutions and international dialogue can yield lasting results.

Last year, we symbolically marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of INTERFET's arrival with a blessing ceremony at the site where the INTERFET Memorial will be built, on the former heliport used by the peacekeeping force in Dili. This memorial, currently in the design and development stage, will serve as a place of memory, gratitude, and reflection, aiming to honour those who contributed to peace in Timor-Leste and to preserve, for future generations, the values that guided this historic mission.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, the relationship between Timor-Leste and Australia is that of two sovereign states, neighbours, and partners, united by common interests and a commitment to cooperation. It is a relationship founded on equality, mutual respect, and shared responsibility.

This partnership manifests itself across various sectors, including security, health, agriculture, education, youth, labour migration, human development, and economic resilience, among others.

Thousands of Timorese currently have temporary work opportunities in Australia under the Australia-Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme. These experiences offer not only a chance for personal and professional growth but also a tangible contribution to the Timorese economy through the remittances sent to their families.

Others benefit from scholarships and academic training at Australian universities, increasing our human capital and building lasting links between our communities.

Australia has also clearly and consistently supported the multilateral integration of Timor-Leste. We gratefully recognise the continued public support for our full membership of ASEAN, as well as the strengthening of our membership of the World Trade Organisation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia once again demonstrated its commitment to the Timorese by directly providing vaccines, medical equipment, and technical support. This gesture was especially important at a time when many countries faced significant difficulties in accessing vaccines. Australia's prompt response has played a crucial role in strengthening the Timorese health system and protecting our most vulnerable populations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the most significant milestones in our bilateral relations was the signing, on 6 March 2018, of the Maritime Boundary Treaty between Timor-Leste and Australia. This Treaty, which I had the honour of signing on behalf of our country alongside the then Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs, The Hon. Julie Bishop, definitively established a fair border between our two nations, based on international law – an inspiring example to the world of peaceful dispute resolution.

This conciliation process was carried out under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and was led with firmness and dedication by our current Prime Minister and historic leader, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão. It marked a milestone of maturity in our bilateral relations and offered an opportunity for renewal - a genuine new beginning.

Today, we continue working together to ensure that the development of the Greater Sunrise field delivers real and sustainable benefits to the Timorese, following the spirit and terms of the treaty.

Our economic partnership is expanding. An increasing number of Australian-linked companies now operate in Timor-Leste, contributing to employment, knowledge exchange, and the strengthening of our productive base.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Government's development vision focuses on building a more resilient, equitable, and competitive nation. It is anchored on three main pillars: investment in fundamental infrastructure, economic diversification, and strengthening institutions.

We have an ambitious programme in progress to rehabilitate and modernise roads, national electrification, access to drinking water and sanitation. These investments create the conditions for the economic transformation of the entire country.

We are also dedicated to diversifying the economy by supporting the agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and blue economy sectors. Additionally, we are creating a more favourable environment for both domestic and foreign investment, emphasising administrative simplification, transparency, and institutional modernisation.

Australia is, and will continue to be, a key partner in this effort. Whether it's support for staff training, labour mobility, the development of value chains, or technical and financial cooperation, Australian involvement has been relevant and welcome.

We hope this partnership will continue to develop positively, adapting to new challenges and opportunities, for the mutual benefit of our citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The links between our peoples are not only evident at the state level but also among communities. Friendship Groups – many of which are present at this conference – play an essential role in fostering solidarity, building bridges between Australian and Timorese municipalities, and sharing experiences and skills.

This conference provides us with a unique opportunity to strengthen and broaden these community ties, explore new areas for collaboration, and enhance the capacities of our local authorities.

By promoting dialogue between municipalities and friendly communities, we help strengthen the decentralisation process and encourage more balanced and participatory development.

Timorese municipalities are increasingly playing a significant role in local governance, and Australian Friendship Groups can serve as valuable partners in this effort. Their exchange of experiences and good practices can enhance the capacity of local leaders and bring development closer to the citizens.

Distinguished guests,

It is this community rootedness that provides depth to our relationship. Personal friendships, local ties, mutual understanding - these are the pillars supporting enduring and effective cooperation.

In this spirit, the Australian and Timor-Leste Friendship Network Conference is more than just a symbolic event. It is a celebration of the historic ties that connect us, an affirmation of our shared present, and an investment in the future we aim to build together.

May this friendship, born in adversity, strengthened by solidarity, and renewed through cooperation between communities, continue to serve as a bridge connecting our peoples – a bridge of understanding, progress, and hope - and an inspiration to the world.

Thank you very much.