



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

**SPEECH BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRIME MINISTER
KAY RALA XANANA GUSMÃO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING SESSION OF THE 5TH SEMINAR OF THE
CPLP MARITIME FORUM**

“LEGAL CHALLENGES IN THE MANAGEMENT AND USE OF THE SEA”

Grand Hall of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation
Dili, Timor-Leste
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Palácio do Governo
Avenida Marginal
Dili, Timor-Leste

Your Excellency, Maria das Neves, former Prime Minister of São Tomé and Príncipe

Your Excellency, Aldino Campos, President of the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf

Distinguished Members of Government

Distinguished Delegates of the CPLP

Honoured Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great honour and satisfaction that I take part in the opening of this 5th Seminar of the CPLP Maritime Forum, dedicated to the theme “*Legal Challenges in the Management and Use of the Sea*” — a topic of great importance for our countries.

The sea — a shared and unifying element within our community of nations — compels us to reflect collectively on how to implement good practices and adapt to the global challenges that threaten the world’s maritime space.

Despite the complexity of these challenges — legal, technological, and environmental — we know that the sea is an essential factor for the sustainable economic growth and social development of our countries, both now and in the future. Inaction is not an option!

It is therefore with pride that we host this Forum here in Dili. To those visiting Timor-Leste for the first time, I extend my warmest welcome. And to those returning to our country — welcome back!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know, Timor-Leste is the only CPLP member located in Southeast Asia. Indeed, very recently, it officially became the 11th member of ASEAN — a historic moment, not only for the long years of waiting but also for the careful preparation of the institutions of our still fragile State.

This regional integration, more than a victory for the Timorese people, represents new opportunities for economic and political cooperation.

It also brings new responsibilities for our country. One of these — which we embrace wholeheartedly — is to strengthen proximity, friendship and cooperation between the countries of Southeast Asia and those of the CPLP.

Despite the geographical distance, our relationship with the CPLP is unique and genuine, transcending borders and oceans. Our bond is rooted not only in a common language but also in solidarity, shared values and common goals.

And this has never been more important than in today's world — an era marked by uncertainty, tension and fragmentation at the global level. Taking inspiration from the sea, I say to you: our cooperation can be deep yet calm and ambitious yet steady.

The sea that unites us defines, in many ways, who we are. For each of our nations, the sea holds special meaning. It reflects our identity, our cultural and social fabric, and our vision for economic development.

It is the current that connects the Lusophone world — from the Atlantic to the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Our nine coastal countries, with their respective maritime spaces, represent more than 5% of the global maritime area under the sovereignty and jurisdiction of coastal States worldwide.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Recognising this fundamental importance, fifteen years ago the CPLP came together to launch the CPLP Ocean Strategy, which laid the foundation for maritime cooperation among Portuguese-speaking countries.

Since then, ocean governance and the promotion of joint action among member States for the protection of the marine environment and the sustainable development of Lusophone communities have become a shared cause across our nations.

In 2016, Timor-Leste had the honour of hosting one of these meetings, aimed at strengthening the commitment and integrated vision for the sustainable use of the seas under our national jurisdictions through international cooperation, resulting in the Dili Action Plan for the implementation of the CPLP Ocean Strategy.

We agreed on several specific areas of collaboration, including the creation of the CPLP Ocean Atlas, cooperation in preparing submissions on the extended continental shelf, promoting marine scientific research and marine conservation, and sharing information on deep-sea mineral research.

We also supported educational initiatives, such as the pedagogical project to engage teachers, students, and civil society in raising awareness of the importance of the ocean for our shared future.

Earlier this month, our ministers reaffirmed the transformative potential of the Blue Economy, reiterating their commitment to a series of priorities — particularly the preservation of marine biodiversity and the management of sustainable fisheries — through the updated CPLP Ocean Strategy Action Plan 2025–2027.

All this demonstrates that, although our progress may be gradual, it remains consistent and determined.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, I would like to reflect on three points which, in my view, deserve our attention and commitment.

First, maritime sovereignty and the resolution of boundaries; second, the promotion of the Blue Economy for sustainable development; and third, how we can further project our strategic vision for the ocean.

1. Maritime sovereignty and boundary resolution

Establishing a clear definition of our maritime spaces — including our territorial sea, exclusive economic zones and continental shelves — is the first and fundamental step towards developing and using our resources responsibly.

It is the foundation of sovereignty, stability and the sustainable development of the ocean. Without clarity on who governs each area of the sea, it is difficult — if not impossible — to plan, manage, use and protect marine resources effectively.

For Timor-Leste, the finalisation of maritime boundary delimitation has been a national priority since the restoration of our independence.

This is why we took the unprecedented decision to initiate the first-ever compulsory conciliation under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to delimit our maritime boundary in the Timor Sea with Australia. Australia had chosen not to adhere to the binding dispute-settlement mechanisms under UNCLOS, leading to an impasse in maritime boundary negotiations.

This decision was not taken lightly. It followed extensive consultations with all relevant parties, and most importantly, it reflected the will of our people.

Initiating an untested international process carried risks and uncertainties. Although compulsory conciliation under UNCLOS requires the parties to engage in negotiations in good faith, with the assistance of five conciliators who are internationally renowned lawyers and experts, it is important to note that the process is not binding.

If the parties failed to reach an agreement within one year, the conciliators would issue a report and recommendations for the parties' consideration.

The process may be extended by mutual consent. In the case of Timor-Leste and Australia, it was extended by six months, during which the Conciliation Commission worked closely with both sides to negotiate special arrangements for the Greater Sunrise natural gas field with the Joint Venture partners.

Although we fully understood the risks and uncertainties, this was the only viable option available for delimiting our maritime boundary with Australia.

This achievement is a testament to the principle that disputes between nations — even those involving complex and sensitive issues — can and must be resolved peacefully and in accordance with international law.

The finalisation of our maritime boundary also marked a significant turning point in our bilateral relations with Australia. It enabled both countries to move forward with renewed confidence, focusing on new areas of cooperation, including defence, the economy, technology and connectivity.

We are currently engaged in negotiations with Indonesia to conclude the delimitation of our maritime boundary.

The lessons learned from this journey are relevant to all of us. Around the world, nearly two hundred maritime boundaries remain unresolved. In the African continent alone, only around 35% of maritime boundaries have been delimited. Similar challenges are evident in Southeast Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean.

The Pacific region, in particular, is increasingly vulnerable to the accelerating impacts of climate change and sea-level rise. These changes are altering coastlines and adding new urgency for States to delimit their maritime zones and boundaries.

Finalising boundaries is not a simple task. It is a complex national process involving historical, geographical, political, legal, social and economic considerations.

Unresolved boundaries can hinder resource management and weaken law enforcement. They may create gaps in the ocean where illegal activities thrive, including illegal fishing, trafficking and environmental crimes.

They may also lead to tensions and conflicts between nations, which in turn may spill over into regional or even international instability. Tensions in the South China Sea and the recent conflict between Thailand and Cambodia are clear examples of regional instability triggered by boundary disputes.

For this reason, I encourage all CPLP Member States to continue strengthening dialogue and cooperation with a view to achieving the peaceful and equitable delimitation of maritime boundaries, in accordance with international law and, in particular, with the principles of UNCLOS.

2. Promoting the Blue Economy for Sustainable Development

The second issue is the promotion of the Blue Economy, which holds enormous potential for the sustainable development of our nations.

Timor-Leste lies at the heart of the Coral Triangle. As such, it benefits not only from rich marine biodiversity and immense potential for economic development, but also from an added responsibility for the ecological health of the planet.

Our waters serve as a critical corridor for migratory species, such as pygmy blue whales. This is, in fact, the right time of year to observe whales and dolphins along our coast. If you have the opportunity, I encourage you not to miss it.

The Government of Timor-Leste has recently approved the preliminary version of the *“Policy and Action Plan for the Promotion of a Resilient and Sustainable Ocean Economy in Timor-Leste, 2025–2035”*. This policy, which is now being finalised following an extensive public consultation process, represents a strategy for a modern, environmentally responsible and people-centred approach to the sustainable development of the nation.

The Policy and Action Plan aim to serve as a roadmap for the integrated and inclusive growth of the country’s coastal, marine and maritime sectors.

For us, it is urgent to diversify our economy, generate income for our people, and create employment opportunities for our young population.

At the same time, through this Policy, we will also contribute to the CPLP's broader vision for the promotion, development and conservation of marine resources and their ecosystems.

I therefore commend my sisters and brothers in the CPLP who have already taken important steps on this journey.

Portugal has demonstrated leadership in the fields of marine science, technology and conservation, ranking among the few countries that have designated more than 30% of their marine areas for conservation.

Cape Verde has promoted sustainable marine ecotourism.

Brazil has made significant progress in the areas of conservation and the promotion of ocean literacy.

São Tomé and Príncipe has had its entire territory classified as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Many of you embarked upon this process long before we did, and we are learning from your experiences to understand how they may be adapted to our own context.

We must ensure that we are not merely followers or facilitators enabling only developed countries to explore and benefit from the ocean while our peoples depend upon it for their subsistence.

3. Projecting the CPLP's Strategic Vision for the Ocean

The final point I wish to raise concerns the projection of the CPLP's strategic vision for the ocean.

The potential is vast, but the path towards realising it is not always an easy one. As a small island developing State — and I believe my colleagues from the small island nations of the CPLP may relate to this — we face geographic isolation, limited markets, and technological and human-capacity constraints.

Despite our marine biodiversity and natural potential, we lack, in many areas, the capacity, technology and specialised knowledge needed to fully explore and benefit from these resources. This inequality in access to knowledge and tools has widened the gap between developed and developing nations, particularly small island and coastal States like our own.

These realities mean that our development path cannot mirror that of industrialised countries. However, this should not be seen as a limitation. Rather, it is a call for creativity and determination.

We must ensure that our development path is adapted to our realities, owned by our people, and guided by the priorities we ourselves identify. It cannot merely be decided by us — it must be both decided and led and implemented by us, with the support of international development partners.

Today, technology is the key to unlocking the potential of the ocean — from seabed mapping to monitoring illegal fishing and advancing marine biotechnology. However, many of our nations remain on the margins of these advancements.

For example, when addressing climate change — a central global challenge — it is important to recognise that small island developing States are not responsible for rising global temperatures. Therefore, while we share the responsibility of responding to this crisis, our efforts must take into account the need to improve the well-being and livelihoods of our people, many of whom continue to live in poverty, as well as our limited capacity and contribution to the problem.

Indeed, since the Paris Agreement, greenhouse-gas emissions are 10% higher than they were a decade ago. Responding to climate change — including through the adoption of green-energy solutions — requires technology and capacity. In reality, less than 1% of climate-related investment and technology transfer reaches developing countries, making it extremely difficult for us to achieve a just transition.

A similar challenge exists in relation to marine plastic pollution. The lifestyles of small islands and developing countries generate far less plastic waste than those of developed nations. However, to address this global problem, we need financial resources, technology, and knowledge on how to manage and recycle waste — all of which remain limited in most of our countries.

More recently, we have followed discussions on deep-sea mining in the Area and the economic potential of marine genetic resources located within and beyond national

jurisdictions. To regulate and ensure fair access and benefit-sharing, the United Nations has recently adopted the third implementing agreement under UNCLOS — the *“Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction”* (the BBNJ Agreement / High Seas Treaty), which several of our countries, including Timor-Leste, have already ratified.

While we welcome new scientific discoveries and technological advancements, we must recognise that many of our countries still lack the technical and technological capacity to participate actively in these emerging fields.

The CPLP, with its diversity and shared language and development objectives, can play a unique role in promoting equitable participation. We can do so by shaping international debates to reflect our common interests, and by strengthening cooperation in the fields of science, research, education and innovation.

Together, we can build a Lusophone platform for the exchange of ocean-related technology, linking our universities, research institutes and industries across continents.

Together, we can project our voice with greater knowledge and authority.

Dear friends,

Our history shows that the ocean has always been a bridge — never a barrier — between our peoples. It carried our ancestors, our shared language, and our cultural traits across the world.

Today, it carries our shared hope for a better life for our peoples, and our collective responsibility for a sustainable future.

Let us continue to strengthen this cooperation, protect our ocean, empower our citizens, and ensure that future generations inherit not a sea of challenges, but a sea of opportunities — one in which they can participate fully and with pride.

Thank you very much.

Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão