



**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
CONFERENCE OF THE 16th AJCU-AP SERVICE LEARNING
PROGRAM 2026
ON PEACE AND RECONCILIATION: A PERSPECTIVE FROM A POST-
CONFLICT COUNTRY EXPERIENCE**

**“From Armed Struggle to Nation-building: The Timorese Journey of Peace,
Regional Integration and Global Solidarity”**

São João de Brito Institute
Hera, Timor-Leste
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Palácio do Governo
Avenida Marginal
Dili, Timor-Leste

Excellencies,

Dear Representatives and Faculty Members of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities – Asia Pacific (AJCU-AP),

Dear Participants in the AJCU-AP Service Learning Program,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to be here today, at this Jesuit institution of higher education in Timor-Leste, to take part in this conference dedicated to peace and reconciliation.

It is an even greater honour to welcome you to Timor-Leste, many of you for the very first time. Your presence here, having travelled from different countries across the region, is a tangible expression of solidarity.

It also reflects the very essence of what the Asia-Pacific network of Jesuit colleges and universities seeks to achieve through its Service Learning Program: learning through service, and serving through learning.

For us Timorese, this is a language we know well. We built our nation by serving and learning from one another, especially during the most difficult moments of our history.

Today's theme, **"From Armed Struggle to Nation-building: The Timorese Journey of Peace, Regional Integration and Global Solidarity,"** invites us to look at peace and reconciliation not as mere clichés, but as a demanding process of memory, healing and shared responsibility.

It is through the history of Timor-Leste that I wish to share my reflections with you today, drawing inspiration from the Jesuit educational tradition, and more specifically from the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm of "Context, Experience, Reflection, Action and Evaluation".

Let me begin with a brief historical overview of the journey from armed struggle to independence – a story of resistance, identity and, undoubtedly, of the faith of the Timorese people.

For four hundred years, we lived under Portuguese colonial rule, a period remembered through the imagery of the "Cross and the Sword". Colonisation represented not only domination through force, but also a process of evangelisation and education.

In Timor-Leste, the Cross – the Church and religious authority – had a far deeper and more enduring impact than the Sword, or military power.

Indeed, the role played by the Church in educating the Timorese people is beyond dispute. I refer not only to the formal education provided by the early schoolteachers and the first generations to become literate, but also to the moral and spiritual formation they received.

It was an education founded upon justice, reconciliation, friendship and other fundamental social values. As Pope Francis reminded us in *Fratelli Tutti*, faith must be expressed through respect for human dignity, care for the most vulnerable and an active commitment to peace.

From the Minor Seminary of Soibada to the other seminaries and the first schools—the cradle of education in Timor-Leste—which carried the Christian faith to villages throughout the country, there also emerged the first generation of Timorese leaders, who would later lead the country's political movements during the period 1974–1975.

Portugal's Carnation Revolution in 1974 brought hope of democracy and independence to our small country, albeit within the constraints of that period.

At the time, educational opportunities were extremely limited and university education was virtually non-existent. Moreover, the Timorese had little understanding of regional dynamics and only a limited awareness of the wider world.

In other words, the revolutionary spirit of the time encountered a people with a strong desire for emancipation, but who were largely unprepared for the challenges ahead.

A hurried process of decolonisation, combined with the political inexperience of the small number of educated Timorese and the improvised enthusiasm of a young majority seeking autonomy and opportunity, gave rise to differing visions, deep internal divisions and even violence among us before the foreign occupation had begun.

Conflict often arises simply from the absence of dialogue, mutual respect and tolerance. The lack of these values proved to be just as dangerous as the foreign interests that sought to dominate our country.

In this brief historical account, I can therefore say that we unilaterally declared our independence from Portugal, only to face the shock of the Indonesian invasion just nine days later.

The occupation was prolonged, violent and disproportionate –not only in terms of military and human resources, but also because of the support it received from third countries.

Yet this occupation also revealed that, despite our ideological differences and internal divisions, our Timorese identity and our determination to live in dignity were stronger than anything that sought to divide us.

In response to the growing number of arrests, executions and military defeats during the early years of the conflict, an increasingly courageous, united and selfless resistance gradually emerged.

In complete isolation, we endured forced displacement, hunger, disease, torture and massacres.

This dark chapter in our history has shaped both our past and our future. The wounds of violence and the immense suffering endured by our people can never be forgotten.

My dear young friends,

During the years of occupation, the Timorese people were confronted with an existential choice: to be Indonesian and Muslim, or Timorese and Christian.

It was a difficult choice involving faith, culture and national identity. It was then that our people turned irrevocably towards the Church, embracing mass baptisms both as an affirmation of national identity and as a rejection of assimilation.

But this was not the Church's only contribution to our struggle for independence. Priests and religious sisters welcomed and cared for the Timorese people throughout the armed struggle, provided moral support to those who were persecuted, and served as a vital bridge linking the armed resistance in the mountains with the clandestine movement and the diplomatic front abroad.

Looking back today, we can also honestly acknowledge the mistakes and weaknesses of the early years of our resistance: ideological divisions, intolerance towards differing opinions and objectives, and even our limited understanding of the international context.

Over time, however, we learned to better understand the world, to engage in dialogue among ourselves, to draw strength from the faith of our people, to make use of diplomacy and international law, and to transform our collective suffering and sacrifice into a moral legitimacy recognised by the international community.

Thus, through the commitment of an entire people, our struggle transcended political and ideological labels and became a truly national cause, giving rise to a unity that paved the way for the freedom and independence of Timor-Leste.

Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1999, after twenty-four years of struggle and suffering, the people of Timor-Leste, under the auspices of the United Nations, voted for independence in a historic Popular Consultation.

International law and the commitment to peace prevailed when, on 20 May 2002, we restored our national independence.

It was a memorable day for the Timorese people. It marked the end of one struggle – the armed struggle – but also the beginning of another that was no less demanding: the struggle to build a peaceful State.

For a country emerging from the ruins of conflict, the challenges were immense. Our infrastructure had been destroyed, our social fabric was deeply fragmented, and traumatic memories touched almost every family.

Beyond the physical destruction, there were also deep divisions among the Timorese people: profound wounds and distrust built up over decades.

We had to build everything at once – from State institutions to the foundations of a functioning economy; from the reconstruction of basic infrastructure to education and health systems capable of reaching our people, from the capital, Dili, to the most remote communities.

Faced with this reality, we made a decisive political and moral choice in favour of reconciliation.

We understood that victory could not be turned into vengeance. Dialogue and forgiveness – among ourselves as Timorese and with our Indonesian neighbours – would become the foundations of the just and lasting peace we sought to build.

Since then, we have chosen to preserve memory without nurturing resentment. That, in itself, is the truest form of courage: the courage to forgive without erasing the truth.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Young People and Students,

Thus began the construction of our democratic State governed by the rule of law. Our Constitution became our new "weapon", enshrining the values for which we had fought: self-determination, a multi-party political system, freedom of civil and religious expression, equality between women and men, the protection of our languages, culture and identity, and the inalienable respect for the human rights of every Timorese citizen.

Over time, we also came to understand that peace is not merely the absence of war. A young State is also a fragile State, where every achievement is accompanied by setbacks and by the frustrations of a people who have endured great suffering.

True peace requires human development and social justice. It requires us to fight poverty and inequality, ensure access to education and healthcare, create decent employment, especially for young people, and guarantee that everyone is included in decision-making processes.

Once again, unity around our shared goal of national development became essential to preserving stability.

Only then does peace cease to be an abstract ideal and become a lived experience of dignity in the daily lives of our people.

Our experience of conflict and suffering also led us to action and to a continual assessment of our own mistakes and shortcomings, always seeking to strengthen our institutions, improve the

systems and procedures of public administration, and ultimately enhance the living conditions of the Timorese people.

This journey transformed us into a sovereign State with its own voice. We ceased to be a forgotten nation and became a regional and global actor.

Today, our identity is no longer defined solely as “a people who suffered and resisted”, but also as a people committed to building peace, both regionally and globally.

Today, the moral authority we earned through our resistance must be translated into constructive leadership. It was this conviction that led us to pursue membership of ASEAN as a central pillar of our foreign policy.

Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN in October 2025 marked a historic milestone in our twenty-four years as an independent State.

This achievement was the result of a long process of domestic preparation, frank dialogue with our neighbours and partners, and a firm commitment to the values, rules and mechanisms that underpin the regional community of Southeast Asia.

For the Timorese people, membership of ASEAN means more than becoming part of a geopolitical and socio-economic space. It means belonging to a human family with which we identify and alongside which we wish to grow and prosper.

Beyond providing a privileged platform for economic integration, trade diversification and investment, ASEAN represents an opportunity for the social and human development of the Timorese people.

At a time of heightened geopolitical tension, ASEAN also offers an opportunity to join forces in addressing the major global challenges we face – from human, food, energy, technological and climate security – through restraint, humanism and the promotion of peace.

For Timor-Leste, regional integration is also an opportunity to deepen cultural dialogue among peoples and another opportunity to learn through service and to serve through learning.

Timor-Leste's experience as a country emerging from conflict, which chose reconciliation over vengeance, is therefore placed at the service of ASEAN and the international community.

Likewise, our experience in using international law for the peaceful settlement of disputes is now shared with others. Our maritime boundary negotiations with neighbouring countries are one such example, demonstrating our concrete contribution to a more just world.

Dear Young People,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Timor-Leste is firmly committed to dialogue, multilateralism and international solidarity.

It was for this reason that we supported and led the establishment of the g7+, formally launched in Dili in 2010.

This intergovernmental organisation of countries affected by conflict and fragility was established to better understand, within each national context, the root causes of the challenges they face, with a view to building peace, strengthening the State and enhancing cooperation among nations.

Fragile countries cannot remain merely recipients of assistance. They can and should also be producers of knowledge and active partners in building and consolidating peace. The experience of suffering is not only a wound; it can also become a source of moral authority in support of fairer global reforms.

This is the message that the g7+, born here in Timor-Leste, seeks to bring to the world: in an age marked by wars, forced displacement, growing inequalities and the climate crisis, there can be no genuine global peace without justice for the world's most poor, vulnerable and at war peoples.

Today, we live in a world where, across several continents, we witness open conflicts and prolonged wars, increasing political and cultural polarisation, and a recurring temptation to resolve differences through force rather than dialogue.

The Timorese people know from experience that there can be no true peace built upon falsehood or oblivion. We must preserve memory and uphold the truth. We must also have the courage to listen, to correct our mistakes and to rebuild.

This is what reconciliation means. It is justice, both individual and collective. It is the courageous choice to build a shared future.

This is also where young people and Jesuit universities have such an important role to play. You, the students participating in the AJCU-AP program, come from different countries across the Asia-Pacific region, and you know that your own societies also face inequality, exclusion and tension.

The Jesuit tradition calls for the formation of "men and women for and with others" – people who understand leadership as a moral vocation rather than merely a position of power.

People who value discernment, dialogue, service and solidarity.

People who see peace not as something to be taken for granted, but as something that must be built every single day.

I hope that, through this Service Learning Program in Timor-Leste, you will discover new pathways for building peace in your own societies, throughout our region and across the world.

On behalf of the Government of Timor-Leste, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to AJCU-AP, the São João de Brito Institute, CEIPAR, and everyone who made this gathering possible.

Thank you very much.

Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão