



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

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

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE
INAUGURATION OF THE 79TH SESSION OF THE
WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Dili Convention Centre, Timor-Leste
7 September 2026



Palácio do Governo
Avenida Marginal
Dili, Timor-Leste

His Excellency Dr Nalinda Jayatissa, Chairperson of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia and Minister of Health and Mass Media of Sri Lanka,

Her Excellency Dr Élia dos Reis Amaral, Minister of Health of Timor-Leste,

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization,

Excellencies, Ministers of Health,

Distinguished Heads of Delegation and Representatives of Member States of the WHO South-East Asia Region,

Dr Nilesh Buddha, Officer-in-Charge of the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia,

Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director Emeritus,

Honourable Members of the National Parliament,

Members of the Government of Timor-Leste,

Members of the diplomatic corps and development partners,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Bom dia. Bem-vindu mai Timor-Leste!

On behalf of the Government and people of Timor-Leste, I warmly welcome you to Dili for the 79th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia.

Eleven years after we first hosted this Committee, it is a privilege to welcome our regional health family back to our country.

In Timor-Leste, welcoming guests brings both responsibility and happiness. We open our homes, share what we have and take time to listen. I hope that, during your stay, you will experience this hospitality and discover something of our people, our culture and our beautiful country.

Our traditional tais carry the skill and memory of generations. Many threads are woven patiently together, creating something strong and beautiful.

It offers an image for our gathering: different peoples, different experiences, joined by a common responsibility for human life.

WHO has invited the world to "Walk the Talk" for health. Here in Timor-Leste, I would like us to carry this idea forward in our own way: let us walk, talk and act together for health.

Dear friends,

For the Timorese people, health is closely connected to our journey towards freedom and dignity.

Our people endured conflict, displacement, hunger and disease. Families and communities sustained one another through years of hardship. Their courage, and the solidarity of friends around the world, helped bring us to independence.

When we restored our independence in 2002, we faced the immense task of rebuilding our country. We had to establish institutions, restore services and prepare our people to take responsibility for our future.

We have been guided by our vision for our nation and by the long-term plan set out in our Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030.

That Strategic Development Plan seeks to build a prosperous Timor-Leste with a healthy, well-educated and skilled population.

At its heart is a recognition that the development of our country depends on the development of our people.

This means investing in education and skills but also ensuring that our people can live healthy and productive lives and participate fully in the economic and social development of our nation.

Health, therefore, has a central place in our development strategy. Our Strategic Development Plan sets out a framework for providing quality health services that are accessible to all Timorese people and supported by a skilled health workforce and effective health infrastructure.

It also recognises that better health is not only an end in itself. A healthier population helps to reduce poverty, improve livelihoods and strengthen the productivity and prosperity of our nation.

We have made significant progress. In 2024, WHO recognised Timor-Leste's elimination of lymphatic filariasis as a public health problem. In July last year, our country was certified malaria-free.

These achievements belong to health workers, community volunteers, families and public servants, supported by WHO and our partners.

They show what sustained national effort and international cooperation can accomplish.

We must now bring that determination to the challenges that remain: tuberculosis, malnutrition, preventable deaths among mothers and children and the growing burden of noncommunicable diseases.

We must also be honest about the distance that still separates many families from the care they need.

Our public health services are free. Yet a family in a remote suco may still face a difficult journey, transport costs and time away from earning a living.

Reaching a health facility must result in timely care, with the right staff, medicines and equipment available.

Our integrated health program, “Programa Integrado de Saúde”, is helping bring services closer to communities. Its promise must be carried forward through reliable primary care and effective links with hospitals.

The experience of the patient must guide our decisions.

Excellencies,

The work of this Committee can help bring that care within everyone's reach.

We must understand the journey people make to obtain care. The mother travelling from the mountains, the person with a disability seeking an accessible service and the young person looking for help with mental health all have something to teach us.

In our sucos and aldeias, families, community leaders, the Church and other faith communities, and health volunteers help sustain trust and care. Their participation can help services reach people whose needs are too easily overlooked.

I am pleased that tomorrow's program includes a physical activity session. It is a welcome opportunity to put our message into practice! Let that spirit continue when we return home, through healthier schools, workplaces and communities, with opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to participate.

Walking together also means standing alongside countries with fewer resources, and communities affected by conflict or emergencies. Our region is stronger when every country has the capacity to protect its people.

Our experience of reconciliation has taught us the value of listening, patience and mutual respect. These qualities matter in public health. We need frank discussions about what is working, where we are falling short and what we can learn from one another.

Tomorrow's Ministerial Roundtable on human resources for health and equity in specialised care is especially relevant to Timor-Leste.

We need skilled professionals across the whole health system. We need to educate them well, support them at work and create opportunities for them to serve where they are most needed.

I encourage our countries to deepen cooperation between training institutions and hospitals, expand mentoring and exchange and support specialist services that strengthen national capacity.

The knowledge shared through this Committee should reach the health centre and the bedside.

Our dialogue must also extend across government. Health ministers need the partnership of those responsible for finance, education, agriculture, water, infrastructure and the environment. At the highest level of political leadership, we must help bring these efforts together.

Dear friends,

Our discussions here must lead to action in our countries.

The program before you addresses issues with immediate consequences for our people.

Your deliberations should advance a common objective: that no person is denied the chance of a healthy life because of where they were born, where they live or what they can afford.

Eliminating communicable diseases and closing the gap on tuberculosis will demand persistence.

Every person with tuberculosis should be diagnosed promptly, treated effectively and supported to complete treatment without discrimination or hardship.

At the same time, noncommunicable diseases are changing the health needs of our societies. Prevention must become part of daily life. We need healthier food, less tobacco and harmful alcohol use, more physical activity, earlier diagnosis and dependable treatment.

And we must care for mental health with the same seriousness and compassion we bring to physical illness.

These priorities cannot be separated from the conditions in which people live.

Good nutrition, safe water, sanitation and education begin shaping health long before a person enters a clinic.

Protecting mothers, newborns and adolescents is an investment in our future. Women and girls must receive respectful care and have a voice in decisions affecting their health.

Medical devices, diagnostics, digital health and artificial intelligence can extend expertise to remote communities and help health workers make timely decisions.

Excellencies,

Our ambitions require resources, and resources require responsible stewardship.

As you examine program budgets and implementation, I encourage you to keep the same practical questions before you: what will change for people, who will carry the work forward and how will we know that it is succeeding?

We should protect essential services, invest in our health workers and direct support towards the greatest unmet needs.

We should strengthen national systems and coordinate our partnerships around priorities defined with the countries and communities concerned.

Timor-Leste values WHO's technical leadership and its support to our national health development.

We also value this Committee as a place where countries can learn from one another and find common ground.

Our membership of ASEAN adds another opportunity to contribute to cooperation in our wider neighbourhood.

Before I conclude, I express my appreciation to His Excellency Dr Nalinda Jayatissa for his leadership as Chairperson of the Regional Committee and his commitment to cooperation for the health of our peoples.

I also thank Dr Tedros, Dr Nilesh Buddha and Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh for joining us, and all delegations for their presence and commitment.

I extend my appreciation to the organising teams, support staff and volunteers. I also pay tribute to the health workers across our region whose daily service gives meaning to our commitments.

I thank our Minister of Health, Dr Élia dos Reis Amaral, for her leadership in organising this important regional gathering. I congratulate the Minister and her team for giving Timor-Leste this opportunity to contribute to our shared health agenda.

Dear friends,

When you leave Dili, I hope you will carry with you the warmth of our people and a renewed determination to serve your own.

Let us walk together, so that we understand the lives behind our decisions.

Let us talk together, with honesty, respect and a willingness to learn.

Let us act together, so that our commitments become care that people can depend upon.

With this shared purpose, it is my honour to inaugurate the 79th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia.

I wish you productive deliberations and a successful meeting.

Obrigadu barak. Thank you very much.

Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão