



Speech by
H.E. President José Ramos-Horta
of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste
at the 77th Session
of the United Nations General Assembly

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Mr. President,
Sr. Secretario-General,
Excelências,

It is an honour to return to this Assembly of Nations once again as President of my country for which I was re-elected five months ago.

Since then, I have focused on our domestic agenda, building bridges with the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary branches, engaging urban and rural communities, youth and students, civil society, religious leaders, professionals, farmers, traders, private and banking sectors to consolidate inclusive peace and security, nourish our lively democracy and democratic institutions, and reenergise our feeble economy.

We are rated best performing democracy in Southeast Asia (Freedom House, Washington, and Economist, UK) and number 17 in Media Freedom (Reporters Without Borders, Brussels).

Democracy and Sustainable Development must progress together, both have to be all inclusive, embracing every age group, youth, women and men. All segments of

the society must enjoy equal opportunities and see tangible outcomes of their participation in the democratic process.

My Presidency is an open one, with no iron gates and no armed security. It is accessible to everyone, particularly children, who have unrestricted access to the presidential grounds with a special swimming pool built for them, and a center for after school activities like learning music, singing, reading, painting, games, computers, etc.

Half of my monthly salary of less than \$5,000 (after tax) is donated to destitute families. I have not authorized purchase of new vehicles for the Presidency and no member of my staff is assigned an official car. For this UNGA session I brought a delegation of seven and we all stay in the cheapest hotel we could find near the UN.

Working with the Government, National Parliament and international partners, we are committing ourselves to seriously confront extreme poverty, child malnutrition and stunting. To confront stunting and malnutrition we are actively promoting breastfeeding, aiming to drastically reduce the use of artificial baby formulae, providing cash and in kind support for pregnant women and mothers, expanding early childhood education.

This is a moral and ethical challenge. This is our collective commitment.

Like almost every country on the Planet, Timor-Leste endured multiple climate change catastrophes, prolonged dry season, followed by floods, the Covid-19 pandemic, and now the global economic impact of Russia-Ukraine-NATO confrontation.

We had minimal direct impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of hospitalisations and fatalities. More children died of dengue than of COVID-19. But the policies we undertook to prevent the spread of the insidious virus, such as curtailing free movement of peoples and goods, inevitably impacted on the livelihood of rural and urban people across the country. Farmers and traders suffered the most.

To protect our children we close down schools even though we knew that this decision would have serious detrimental consequences for the hundreds of thousands of our children and youth who had to miss school, and missed out on the "one meal a day" program, which provides a meal for every child in schools across the country.

In the very early days of the onset of the pandemic, our health authorities and WHO and other UN Agencies on the ground, scrambled, worked hard day and night to prevent the much feared virus from killing our people. Thanks to the prompt actions taken by the Government, supported by our partners and friends we avoided a public health crisis.

Australia proved to be a true sisterly neighbour promptly delivering every assistance our fragile health system required. We are deeply grateful for the speedy generous action taken by the Australian government in deploying medical specialists, ventilators and entubation equipment, and training local staff. When a vaccine became available Australia provided us beyond our needs enabling the vaccination of more than 72% of our people, including children.

Government and civil servants, who at times move at a tropical leisurely pace, quickly drafted a COVID-19 prevention and economic recovery strategy which included cash transfers and food baskets for every low income household.

We are grateful to COVAX for the initial shipments of vaccines. We are grateful to New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Japan, China, the EU, Portugal and the US, for their generous support in kind and cash. And all our friends cited above had a worse pandemic to contend with in their own cities. Yet they didn't forget us.

UN agencies - UNDP, WHO, UNICEF, WFP and others - performed admirably in close coordination among them and in partnership with Government sectoral agencies and international partners.

To all we are profoundly indebted.

In a world plagued with conflicts and man made catastrophes, from Myanmar to Afghanistan to Yemen to Ukraine, Timor-Leste is an oasis of tranquillity. Common

criminality is very low, armed robbery is unheard of. We do not have organized crime.

Our Catholic population and Protestant and Muslim brothers and sisters communities live side by side in total harmony. Timor-Leste does not have a single case of ethnic or religious based tension and conflict.

Working with the Secretariat of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity established in February 2019 to mark the historic meeting in Abu Dhabi between Pope Francisco and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Professor Ahmed Al-Tayeb, where the two world leaders signed the Document on Human Fraternity, I submitted the said Document to our National Parliament immediately after my election. This was voted unanimously as a National Document that will be adapted as part of our school curriculum. Timor-Leste, the second most Catholic country in the world, became the first country to officially adopt the Declaration on Human Fraternity. This kind of interfaith initiative is, I believe, relevant to the High Level event marking the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities held this week.

In recent weeks, upon taking office, I visited our two closest neighbours and friends, Australia and Indonesia. In both countries I was extremely well received by my official hosts and the people. With our giant neighbours we have the closest possible relationship, encompassing all sectors, from A to Z. I have already mentioned Australia's outreach during COVID19, and want to give special recognition here to Indonesia's partnership with us to achieve truth, reconciliation and friendship between our two countries and to cooperate on economic and educational issues.

In the third week of October I will visit Cambodia at the invitation of His Majesty the King. Our friend Prime Minister Hun Sen who holds the rotating chairmanship of ASEAN is among our most ardent advocates for ASEAN membership. In the first week of December I will visit Vietnam and Singapore.

With support from all ASEAN countries and its highly competent Secretariat, the UN, EU and ADB, we made significant progress in our preparation towards ASEAN accession.

Senior expert missions from ASEAN, covering its three pillars- political-security, social-cultural and economic - have conducted thorough reviews of Timor-Leste ASEAN accession preparedness.

Their reports support our own views and those of UN Agencies, Breton Woods institutions as well as ADB and foreign missions based in Díli that Timor-Leste has made significant strides since independence and that we should be welcome into ASEAN as its 11th member. We hope to become a full member in 2023.

In 2023 Timor-Leste will hopefully gain WTO accession, another natural extension of our country's regional and global economic integration. ASEAN and WTO accessions are driven by Timor-Leste's own economic interests, such as domestic economic reform process to ensure healthy enabling environment for FDIs and national investment, and diversification of our economy.

ASEAN membership is a strategic imperative, as important for TL's stability and prosperity as much as peace and prosperity in TL should matter to ASEAN. As much as peace and prosperity in our neighborhood benefits all, conflicts or threats of, and risks originating in one country inevitably impact on others.

Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Heads of State and of Government
Ministers, Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen

At independence we successfully negotiated a revenue sharing agreement with Australia, and developed an important oil and gas field in the Timor Sea which generated substantial revenues for our treasury beginning in 2007. It is with these revenues that we have being able to finance the development of much needed infrastructures, port, airport, national and rural roads, schools, electricity, etc. The World Bank data notes that electricity now reaches more than 96% of the country.

We are now engaged in sustained negotiations with our Joint Venture Partners to develop the Greater Sunrise gas field. Its development is central to our country's future and the well-being of our people.

At independence 20 years ago, we had 20 medical doctors, today we have more than 1,200 doctors for a population of 1,5 million. This would not have been realized without Cuban solidarity. At independence 20 years ago, life expectancy was less than 60, now a Timorese woman can expect to live beyond 71 years of age.

Connectivity will surge in the next 3-4 years as TL will be linked by several submarine cables to Australia, Indonesia and beyond. As it is, we already have a high percentage of mobile phone and social media users and are experimenting the exciting digital age and E-Government.

Excellencies, I wish to now touch upon three matters of profound concern:

The extremely serious food crisis affecting millions of people in Africa and Asia. I hope that all have read carefully the letter of our esteemed Secretary-General dated 31 August 2022 addressed to all Heads of State which provides with clinical precision exact figures on the number of our fellow human beings, women and children, youth and elderly, in several African countries, in Yemen and Afghanistan. The World Bank's Food Commodity Price Index, which reached a record high in nominal terms during March-April 2022, went up by 15 percent between April and May 2022, and is more than 80 percent higher than two years ago. Add to this the recent devastating floods in Pakistan inflicting heartbreaking suffering on over 30 million people, with over 7 million people displaced, and causing widespread total destruction. Crisis on top of crisis. Our deepest sympathy goes to the people of Pakistan.

Excellencies,

Aid to poorer countries of the South should not be cancelled out to be reallocated to address the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. In 2015, donor countries reallocated their ODA commitments to the North African, Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugee crisis flowing into Europe, causing an estimated 15 percent drop in total aid. The potential for a diversion of aid is even greater now, after 349 billion dollars were estimated as needed for the reconstruction of Ukraine. We must ensure that the Ukrainians are supported, but not at the expense of unity with the many struggling people in other nations.

In the aftermath of the 2008-2009 subprime crisis which had knock on effect across the globe, hundreds of billions of dollars were quickly mobilized to rescue exposed European and American banks. Draconian fiscal austerity measures in the form of cuts in public expenditure and higher taxes were forced on the workers and middle class in the crisis affected Western countries.

But rarely are we able to inspire the rich to show the same level of compassion and wisdom towards the poorer South. I always believe that we are all part of the great Human Family. Yet some seem to feel that we are not really equal, we are not part of the same human family, since part of the world lives in dazzling citadels, while their billions of distant relatives live in poor global neighborhoods.

The WEOG countries started off on high moral ground in confronting Russia's invasion of Ukraine but may end up losing the support of the developing world which after all are 80% of the global population.

They should pause for a moment to reflect on the glaring contrast in their response to the wars elsewhere where women and children have died by the thousands from wars and starvation. The response to our beloved Secretary-General's cries for help in these situations have not met with equal compassion. As countries in the Global South, we see double standards. Our public opinion does not see the Ukraine war the same way it is seen in the North.

And we are now faced with a ruinous situation in terms of the rising cost of living for the poor. This has already resulted in riots in Sri Lanka, Peru, Kenya and most recently Haiti. Low income countries were able to spend only a fraction of the amounts spent by high income countries on COVID19 stimulus packages – 20 percent of GDP for high income countries, 6 percent for middle income and 2.5 percent for low income.

As a result, many countries had to increase their debt. Debt levels now limit us in protecting the weakest and most vulnerable from the effects of rising prices, let alone allow us to increase our efforts to address the climate emergency which threatens our very existence. The number of developing countries in debt distress or at high risk has doubled since 2015, to 60 percent. Governments in the North need to respond faster to create the financing packages needed to protect against

the double economic shocks of COVID19 and the Ukraine war – we need less talk and more action.

But equally I want to address our cries for solidarity and fraternity to the billionaires and trillionaires of Asia, África and Latin America. There's more liquidity in Asia than in Europe and USA combined. It is time for the richest families and corporations of the so-called Global South to gather in a historic Summit, hosted by our esteemed Secretary-General, to commit themselves to a vision and plan of action to rid Asia, África and Latin America of extreme poverty, child malnutrition, provide clean water and sanitation to every poor community, vaccines and basic public health, better education facilities, and better housing with renewable energy and connectivity for better access to education and business.

This can be done by the rich of the global South....all it requires is vision, great hearts, audacity and understanding that investing on the poor of our own countries we are investing in Peace, in equality and prosperity for all. The rich will be richer and will live with inner bliss from the magnitude of their great deeds. The hundreds of millions freed from the shackles of poverty will create immense dividends for all.

Abysmal leadership failures in Western and in Developing countries in resolving tensions and differences have resulted in endless wars and death of innocent women and children. Human induced Climate change and unprecedented natural catastrophes are destroying livelihoods of tens of millions across the globe. Globally, we missed an opportunity to resolve the COVID19 conflict through vaccine justice and cooperation rather than vaccine nationalism and competition.

The people of Myanmar feel abandoned, betrayed, by the so-called international community. They ask, why the difference in treatment, prompt and extremely generous support for Ukrainian civilians and refugees, so much sophisticated military support for Ukraine resistance, and such a mute reaction to the war waged against the people of Myanmar? But they are still fighting on and dying.

The Myanmar conflict is impacting the security and stability of neighbouring countries. It may escalate.

There has to be dialogue by all involved in the conflicts in Ukraine, in Myanmar and in other crises around the world. The Tatmadaw cannot claim it is defending itself from external aggression. In the Ukraine conflict, Russia and Ukraine should clear their ports and sea routes and allow normal resumption of permitted international shipping activities, following on the breakthrough in the grain and fertilizer agreements brokered by the Secretary General. This is the kind of action we need to see even more of from the UN, it strengthens its credibility with all our people.

As there are extremely limited number of credible neutral global leaders, the UN Secretary-General and high Envoys of his choice should work hard day and night to reach a humanitarian ceasefire agreement, and provisional peace agreement. The ultimate goal will have to be a comprehensive, permanent peace agreement. What it should be aimed now is a temporary cessation of troop movements, military action, humanitarian air and land corridors and zones for unimpeded humanitarian assistance and resumption of export and import activities.

Russia, Ukraine and NATO countries have to swallow their pride, review their past policies that led to this mutual suicide, back away from each other borders, let Ukrainians rebuild their country and lives, let Russians retreat with security to their borders.

J. Ramos-Horta