

## SPEECH FOR COMMEMORATION OF INTERFET 21<sup>ST</sup> ANNIVERSARY AND BALIBO HOUSE MUSEUM LAUNCH ON 19 SEPTEMBER 2020

Distinguished Guests,...

Bom dia and Good Morning. It is indeed a deep pleasure and honour to participate in this Commemoration of the 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of INTERFET and the Balibo House Museum launch, here in beautiful Bobonaro amidst the rugged and undulating mountains.

The small island of Timor, both West Timor and East Timor, situated only about 500km north of Australia, has spent most of its history at the crossroads between major powers dominating maritime southeast Asia and many who were contesting for its territory. It was first used as a trading post for China and India, and then in the seventeenth century the western part became colonised by the Dutch while the Portuguese took over the eastern part of the island. The rest was robust history with naval and air bombardments, continued resistance against military occupation and terror, covert attacks with brutal tactics for integration, showing visible 'poor international governance' which resulted in two parallel systems of rule; the colonial and the indigenous one.

Even though the *Sentenca Arbitral* codified the border between the eastern and the western part of the island in 1915, the Timorese people all over the island sadly but courageously fought the occupation by Japan in World War II with guerrilla tactics under the leadership of Australian commandos. Even though Australia left the island in 1943, the Timorese continued their guerrilla fighting on the side of the Allies until the end of the war and at a very high human life cost; where disease, malnutrition, and death were rampant wiping a big part of our population and our ancestral dreams.

Despite Timorese efforts and sacrifice, the island remained divided between two foreign masters after the war, the western part was incorporated into Indonesia while the

eastern part remained under Portuguese administration. In the 1970s, a civil war broke out between the pro-Portuguese and pro-independence movements in this Timorese colony. It is at that point that the situation of East Timor appeared in the UN Security Council desktop for the first time. But however, respect for the territorial integrity of East Timor; honour for the little people of this homeland; and humanity was still not valued and cherished for the people of East Timor; leaving this half island lonely, sad and with terrorizing fear. This homeland was relegated to a 'closed colony' status by the military from December 1975 through 1 January 1989.

Nevertheless, East Timor had always the ancestor's spirits, including some very good hidden friends and divine support as angels with glorious guiding light to break away from massacre and misery to independence with new-found freedom for country development. I am glad to stand here with you, my friends, veterans and neighbours to pay a humbling tribute to some pristine goodwill and continuous historical activities and to be reminded that **'a friend in need is a friend indeed'** .

Now to move a bit fast forward in history, there was certainly the unstoppable warfare and trauma, of the constant militia excursions at the borders which continued and which had waged a months-long campaign of violence after the Timorese voted for independence and freedom in August 1999. In recollection vividly, at that time when East Timor was not independent, we and our families were continuously dislocated and vulnerable to high risk and threats of the militia and the local people in the villages were endlessly intimidated and terrorized.

Gratitude with a big 'Thank You-Obrigado' is certainly registered in our mindsets, to the international community, particularly to many Australians and war veterans though not expressed by Timorese eagerly and often, as it deeply hurts with depressed memories of our lost ones. I hope you understand as we were caught through the calm and through the storm. The support of the United Nations and specifically including many dedicated international soldiers, missionaries and veterans is well recorded in our colourful Timor-Leste resistance history. I notice many old faces here and veterans this morning in this little crowd of heroes and champions.

The Balibo Fort Veteran Museum will demonstrate how soldiers marched through sucos and how veterans served in Timor-Leste through the wars, our Resistance, the INTERFET days with the flag of the International Stabilisation Force. This Balibo museum will be a veteran sanctuary for Timorese, Australian and International veterans, a permanent commemoration of the gallant role of soldiers to Timor-Leste's unique terrorism; and will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Timorese people's vote for independence and deployment of the courageous INTERFET.

I understand that the Balibo Fort has become an important 'headquarters' for the contemporary Timor Awakening Program for both the Australian veterans and Timorese counterparts and is another set piece for East Timor's cultural identity in connecting with the historical East Timorese Kingdoms and 'liurai' .

History reminds us that many soldiers fell down and lay their crowns walking through the valleys of even foreign lands. I want to say this to all the Australian veterans and Timorese freedom fighters; **A good friend knows all your best stories, but a best friend has lived them with you. 'You never let go' but instead sacrificed in your uniforms for our struggling self-determination, autonomy and dignity which at one time had no destiny or calling.**

We acknowledge these sacrifices that underlined home the subsequent dangers the UN peacekeepers faced daily in Timor-Leste borders. We bow to the Australian veterans and Timorese freedom fighters who have fallen. As we rebuild, we are proud of your sacrifices and international service as you now join the distinguished ranks of those that have made the ultimate sacrifice in humanity. Soldiers' Lives Matter; Veterans' Lives Matter.

In closing, I thank particularly the Australian Government including for treasuring the Balibo House Trust Museum and not forgetting the contemporary contributions of the international coalition of forces here in Timor-Leste in Defence Sector Reforms in the specific interest of F-FDTL professionalism and modernization. Thank you all for this awesome camaraderie and solidarity with the people of BOBONARO.

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