

Volunteering, Reaching Out for Reconciliation and Peace

by

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Keynote Address to the 17th IAVE World Volunteer Conference

It is a great honor to be here, representing the people of Timor-Leste, at the 17th IAVE World Volunteer Conference. I warmly thank the organizers of this Conference, namely Dr. Kang and Madam Liz Burns, for giving me this opportunity and for challenging me to further reflect upon this important theme and its implications.

A reconciliation process compels one to reflect upon the universality of pain, suffering, and forgiveness. These feelings know no boundaries — they are the human condition. Sometimes the pain is so overwhelming that talk of forgiveness seems like another insult — people who talk to perpetrators of injustice are accused of insulting the victims. Initiating dialogue with a recent foe is a difficult process. In this sense, I come today from the field of sorrows where the sea of sadness washed our shores for so many years that we even lost names of those for whom we seek justice. I have heard the same words from our brothers and sisters in other places in the world. We know from our knowledge of history that civilization evolved from brutality, but also that peace followed great wars.

What then does a tolerant society in the 21st century do to speed up the healing process? Truth and Reconciliation are important elements but the parties must become engaged — dialogue is the primary objective and conditions for an effective exchange of views a basic requirement. Getting the opposite sides to the table sounds like a simple

negotiation but reality is very complex. People have different perceptions.

Let me explain the situation in Timor-Leste in more detail. In 2000 we strove to revive dialogue and many meetings were held starting with Jakarta and including gatherings in Singapore, Tokyo, Denpasar and Baucau, Timor-Leste. These meetings were largely aimed at promoting dialogue with the pro-autonomy leadership.

It must be acknowledged that the people did not agree with these meetings and we were accused of distorting the spirit of reconciliation. We reflected deeply on this message from the people and resolved to identify another mechanism. On the other hand, reconciliation could not be strictly limited to this period of our history. The reconciliation process is one that has been ongoing, even during the armed struggle stage, and covers a period of over two decades.

Our process of reconciliation began in the aftermath of events before the invasion of Timor-Leste by Indonesian military, in August 1975, when the two main parties engaged in a brief but violent clash whose effects are still felt today. To this, we must add the process arising from the violence in September 1999 perpetrated by militia groups organized, structured and funded by some sectors of the Indonesian military determined to block the self-determination and independence process of Timor-Leste.

The need for us to formulate a National

Mr. Xanana Gusmão, President of Timor-Leste, addressed the 17th World Volunteer Conference of the International Association of Volunteer Effort (IAVE), November 11-15, in Seoul, Korea.

The conference brought together over 1,200 people from some 80 countries. Under the theme of "Volunteers Reaching out for Peace and Reconciliation," the conference aimed to strengthen the relationships between volunteer organizations.

Reconciliation Policy became clear as well as the need for all the parties involved, government, judiciary, and civil society to be guided by a single Code of Conduct without which our efforts at reconciliation were bound to fail.

All of the government bodies agreed that reconciliation should offer a means whereby the perpetrators of human rights violations can sit together with the victims and community leaders. From here commenced the second phase of the reconciliation process mostly concentrated on the September 1999 violence. With the announcement of the unqualified support of the Indonesian authorities, we proceeded to organize meetings at various localities along the border in both the north and south of the country, including in the enclave of Oecusse-Ambeno, as well as in Bali and West Timor.

Throughout this process I have witnessed tense encounters, which ended with tears being shed and embraces of forgiveness exchanged between former foes. Such meetings allowed us to dispel many of the concerns regarding personal revenge, which persisted.

In each of these meetings, we emphasized the importance of justice being done. Whilst we recognize that many international organizations take exception to our approach, our position continues to be that we must allow the perpetrators of crimes to meet with victims before they decide to return to Timor-Leste and to face trial there.

We advocate a reconciliation process whereby justice is meted out to perpetrators but which eschews revenge, resentment, and hatred.

This is a very complex issue. To start a reconciliation process requires a balancing of interests. On one hand the interests of justice and on the other hand the interests of a suffering community who follow a leader who is unwilling to return for fear of punishment.

As I said earlier, a good knowledge of the laws of Timor-Leste and attitudes to those

suspected of serious crimes is necessary to facilitate the reconciliation process.

A good deal is spoken outside Timor-Leste on the subject of trauma. In East Timor's case I believe trauma is experienced at a personal level, but it is not a generalized phenomenon. Personally I believe that we must view trauma from another angle, that is, as it may be experienced by the family members and particularly the children of those facing prison sentences of 10, 15, or even 20 years.

Reconciliation must be meaningful. I am of the view that reconciliation succeeds only when East Timorese society stops being haunted by the ghosts of conflicts of the past. We have already proudly shown to the world that, in spite of 24 years of violence and suffering which culminated in September 1999, the East Timorese people desire to live in harmony and to attain true peace of mind. The two elections, which took place within the space of 7 months, were carried out peacefully and with an exceptionally high level of popular participation.

We agree with the need for justice. After all, this is a political process and not merely a judicial one. That is why, in my programs

(and I was elected President on the basis of my programs) I defended strongly the need for amnesty for those already indicted and serving prison terms.

I have already mentioned that the process requires a balancing of interests. I wish to include here the national

interest of guaranteeing political and social stability. This must include stability along the border and strengthening our cooperation with Indonesia, in particular its eastern region. Only thus can we further our development process and attain its main goals.

We must see our reconciliation efforts as a means of consolidating national stability and of contributing to world peace.

In this so-called globalization era we all hoped the world would enjoy a type of economic order with a high level of technological development that would enable us to find solutions and seek ways to eradicate poverty,

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hunger, disease and ignorance from the world.

But after all, we now live an era of mistrust, an era where feelings of violent hatred and revenge are gaining ground almost everywhere.

It is very sad to note that at the same time values of freedom and democracy and principles of tolerance and mutual respect are becoming a conscious part of individuals, we also have to regret the rise of intolerance and the systematic use of terror, which hinders constructive dialogue.

Given this fact now that we have entered the new millennium, it is urgent that all peoples of the world unite around the sacred goal of building peace.

Peace cannot be the privilege of a few and an "offer" to all others. Peace is the most fundamental asset of every human being. Peace is not the mere absence of conflict nor is it the mere agreement between countries to avoid war.

Peace must derive from the peace of mind within each human being, between individuals expressed in the solidarity between communities, expressed by tolerance within societies until it reaches the level of mutual respect between countries.

Peace of mind means that people feel truly free; free from psychological or political pressure, free from economic pressure or social tension, free from past trauma, free from the daily shortcomings, and free from the fear of what tomorrow may bring.

Peace is the outcome of the needed interaction of behaviors within a society which, then, breeds policies by the governmental bodies. In this sense, peace must be an act of sovereignty by the people. If each citizen lives at peace with other citizens, every people and every country will live at peace with other countries.

Towards this noble objective, the reconciliation of spirit and minds gains even greater importance.

In a democratic society, difference is the

basis of fundamental principles of individuals. However, there is still intolerance, whichever its character or nature and whichever form it takes to be expressed, in already established and stable democratic societies.

Difference has many dimensions to it and should not be perceived merely in its political content, in the form of freedom of speech, be it in developed societies or in developing and poorer ones, such as ours still undergoing a post-conflict situation.

The complexity arising from difference is the result of repressed feelings, of accumulated feelings of frustration and aspirations.

Therefore, the peace of mind we envisage must be the outcome of a long but permanent effort towards reconciliation.

People's attitudes and the behavior of individuals should be understood in the context of spontaneous reactions, which become irrational because they are not self-controlled, or as residues of hatred and revenge.

The shift towards accepting compromise can only be made if it arises from the conscious acceptance of the norms of tolerance and mutual respect, which, in turn, will encourage the values of fraternity and solidarity.

But this will not be possible without the reconciliation of minds.

Reconciliation is a process with a personal and a social dimension. It must mature within each individual so that society may unite around the values of tolerance and mutual respect.

Reconciliation is not a simple process and therefore it is not an easy one, but it is also not impossible to achieve.

And, without reconciliation there is no peace.

We have established a Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste. Efforts are being undertaken to organize its presence in every district and sub-district to ensure greater efficiency in seeking

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solutions amidst the local communities at village and hamlet level.

The Commission has a mandate that covers all forms of non-physical violence, such as threats, persecution, burning of houses, plunder, killing of live stock and so on, but all blood crimes must be channeled to the judiciary system.

In some areas of the country the Commission has successfully initiated its work by promoting dialogue among conflicting parties. This has led to a commitment to join hands to forget the past and reject violence, which is the most common price paid for “doing justice with one’s own hands”.

There is still much to be done. Above all, there is a need for a collective awareness to seek the truth and demand for justice but in the context of reconciliation so that future generations may live without memories of the horrors of war.

This will also be a way to give due value to the sacrifices made to free our Homeland. Such sacrifices will only be honored when we reach an equitable level of development based on a steadfast determination to eradicate poverty.

We will be able to say that those sacrifices were worthwhile when we reduce infant mortality, when every Timorese family has a house to live in, drinking water and food, when every child attends school and the population has access to health care.

If this does not happen, the grief lived in the past will not be healed and the reconciliation will be a lot harder to achieve. Stability will continue to be an aspiration.

If the reconciliation process is to be comprehensive and deeply rooted in society it is most important that, at political level, there is a collective awareness on the need of such a process.

I am also referring to a National Policy whereby state institutions are the first ones to recognize the magnitude of the process. However, just because there is such recognition, in terms of commitment and support, it does not mean that the road to reconciliation has

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become any easier.

In the case of Timor-Leste, the best-known aspect of reconciliation is the effort made regarding perpetrators and victims of the 1999 violence.

However, there are problems emerging regarding conflicts amidst local communities

because of events that occurred before 1999 and which are demanding due attention from the authorities in the country. At the same time, the population is demanding that the political parties involved in the violent events of 1975 take responsibility of their acts and ask the people for forgiveness. To date, this has not been possible to achieve.

From this you can see that this is not a mere political issue, a question of rhetoric or that it is enough to have the agreement of government and parliament on the reconciliation process.

To forgive is usually an easy thing to do. But the act of being humble, meaning to recognize mistakes and to apologize or ask for forgiveness is a very hard thing to do. It demands great courage — political courage if it refers to politicians, moral courage if it refers to citizens.

When people assume these attitudes, in full humbleness, then they will reveal a human dimension that will deserve the appreciation of all.

The participation of civil society in this process takes up great importance because of the complexity of the process.

Civil society is freer from certain interests and less submitted to political or economic pressure. The concept of civil society is too often attached to NGOs [Non Government Organizations]. Civil society should be perceived as including more than NGOs, which are often too professionalised and linked to policies of governments that assist them.

Civil society should be, first and foremost, the social conscience of duty of those who have the means towards the most vulnerable, of those who have access to knowledge towards those who have none, or less, access to information.

The spirit of volunteering, amidst a society or a community, is a nobler way of working for it does not demand for benefits but rather a sense of responsibility.

I do not wish to state that NGOs are unnecessary; they certainly are necessary in developing and underdeveloped countries for they curtail corruption and the mismanagement, which often exists in poorer countries.

What I wish to state is that we must encourage the work and active participation of the best prepared segments of our society in such varied and relevant areas as peace, democracy, reconciliation, solidarity, tolerance, education, health and ignorance.

In this standardized world of questionable values, volunteering is a movement worth pursuing.

In Timor-Leste we are undergoing a state-building process and our civil society is still experiencing its embryonic stage, as are many other sectors of our nation.

As President, I called upon myself the responsibility not only to nurture civil society but also to assist it in gaining a greater understanding of its role in the state-building process.

The State is its citizens and citizens must be better served in all aspects, so that the State itself may become sound and strong.

In post-conflict processes, civil society has an extremely important role to play. In such processes, conflicts are no longer of an armed nature but often breed generalized violence.

Such conflicts are often grounded on specific interests, which may range from political to psychological, from economic to social ones.

Too often, state institutions are inoperative because their action is mostly addressed to solve problems through appeasement. It is up to civil society to progressively work towards changing mindsets, to change characters and to change attitudes.

Civil society can take up the role of generating debate and dialogue. To accept debate and dialogue is the first step of reconciliation where there is respect for difference, where self-control is exercised and common values are identified as the common denominator leading to understanding and mutual respect.

The value of tolerance will reinforce the yearning for peace every human being aspires. But peace must stop being an aspiration to become reality.

One of the priorities of my term as President will be to continue to unite the Timorese people in the fight to eradicate poverty. In this sense, reconciliation is an essential element in the current process of national reconstruction as in the process of national development.

Early this month and following a number of visits to West Timor, I visited Kupang and Atambua to address the remaining East Timorese refugees in West Timor and the Indonesian authorities.

The small size of our population and the strong sense of community and social solidarity, which are a feature of many economically under-developed nations, have facilitated reconciliation amongst East Timorese. In addition, our people's strong ancestral links to the land have been an important factor in bringing refugees home in spite of fears of possible retribution.

Only a wise policy of Reconciliation can promote harmony within Timorese society and guarantee broad participation as the basic condition for social justice and the improvement of the living standards of the population.

Only then will independence have real meaning for a people who fought, suffered and finally won their right to live in freedom and independence.

We continue to count on the support and exchange of experiences of the democratic governments and institutions, which have assisted us thus far. We share the success we have attained so far with all of you, and we hope and trust that the experience of the small nation of Timor-Leste can contribute in a modest way to informing and enlightening your deliberations here at this conference and your work in the future.

Thank you.