

# Child abuse scandals hang over pope's East Timor visit

Jack Moore with Clement Melki in Port Moresby, AFP via Yahoo News, 8 September 2024



Pope Francis will visit East Timor, Asia's youngest nation, for three days (Valentino Dariell DE SOUSA)

When Pope Francis becomes the first pontiff to visit an independent East Timor, he will confront a clergy beset by child abuse scandals that have been largely ignored by the deeply Catholic country's freedom heroes.

Cases include Nobel-winning Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, who helped Asia's youngest nation free itself from Indonesian occupation, but who the Vatican secretly punished over claims he had sexually abused young children for decades.

There are calls for the 87-year-old pontiff to speak out on child abuse when he lands in the former Portuguese colony Monday as part of his Asia-Pacific tour.

"We ask Your Holiness to encourage the leaders and the people of Timor-Leste to take more effective measures to prevent sexual abuse," the Timor-Leste NGO Forum, a civil society coalition, wrote in a letter Wednesday to Francis.

BishopAccountability.org, a documentation centre on Catholic Church abuse, also called on the Vatican's sexual abuse commission chief, Cardinal Sean O'Malley, to "urge" Francis to "be the victims' champion" on his visit.

Catholic-majority East Timor is one of many countries that has suffered the global scourge of child abuse by members of the clergy long veiled in secrecy.

In 2002 Pope John Paul II accepted the abrupt resignation of Bishop Belo, then the head of East Timor's church, who shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996.

The Vatican said it was for health reasons but did not explain further.

It then permitted him to be sent to Mozambique as a missionary where he worked with children, before he moved to Portugal.

The Vatican secretly sanctioned the bishop in 2020 after claims he sexually abused underage boys over a 20-year period up to 2002.

It banned Belo from any contact with children or with East Timor, conditions it said he formally accepted.

Only when Dutch magazine De Groene Amsterdammer reported the restrictions in 2022, including testimony from a victim who said they were raped by Belo, did the Vatican go public.

The Dutch magazine report's author says allegations about Belo were known in 2002.

Francis later suggested the decision to let Belo retire instead of face consequences was made when attitudes were different.

- Widespread support -

The bishop had won the Nobel Prize for his defence of human rights during the Indonesian occupation, which lasted more than two decades.

He is revered at home for sheltering young demonstrators and saving their lives.

It has helped him retain strong support among the country's 1.3 million people, of which 98 percent are Catholic.

"We feel we have lost him. We miss him," Maria Dadi, East Timor national youth council president, told AFP.

"Because after all he really contributed to the struggle of Timor-Leste."

In another case, defrocked American priest Richard Daschbach was found guilty in 2021 of abusing orphaned, disadvantaged girls.

He was sentenced to 12 years in prison, but has also found support at the highest levels of Timorese society.

Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao courted controversy last year when he visited Daschbach to celebrate his birthday and shared cake with the convicted paedophile. He also attended his trial.

For many in the country, they favour Belo returning for the pope's visit.

"We are very sad without the presence of Bishop Belo," said 58-year-old academic Francisco Amaral da Silva.

"The government and the Catholic Church should invite him."

East Timor's presidential office did not respond to a request for comment. President Jose Ramos-Horta has said punishments for Belo should be handled by the Vatican.

- 'Limited value' -

The pontiff will meet with the Catholic faithful, children, Jesuits and preside over a huge mass during his stay in the capital Dili.

But it remains unclear if he will raise cases that have shocked observers of one of the world's poorest countries.

The pope's schedule does not include a meeting with victims, and the Vatican did not comment before he departed Rome.

Yet he could ad-lib the subject in one of his speeches, which would be a strong gesture.

Francis could also meet victims privately as he has done before, the latest on a 2023 Portugal trip.

But survivor advocates said the pope must acknowledge the sexual violence by Church officials on East Timorese children, including by Belo.

"Those abused by Bishop Belo and other clergy will expect a public statement by Pope Francis on the Church's continued failure to deal with its wayward clergy," said Tony Gribben, founder of the Northern Ireland-based Dromore survivors group.

Gribben said a meeting would "have limited value", citing apologies given by Francis to abuse victims on an Ireland trip in 2018.

"The event was a well-crafted PR exercise," he added.

"But since then, it's business as usual."

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## East Timor looks to the pope's visit as a reward after 20 years of fragile stability

By Niniek Karmini, AP, 8 Sep 2024



### East Timor 20 Years On

*A school teacher sweeps the floor of a classroom before the start of classes in Dili, East Timor, Thursday, Sept. 5, 2024. (AP Photo/Firdia Lisnawati)*

DILI, East Timor (AP) — East Timor is in a festive mood as it prepares for the arrival of Pope Francis on [his first trip to the deeply Catholic country](#), hard on the heels of the 25th anniversary of the referendum on independence from Indonesia.

Francis is due to arrive Monday in one of the world's poorest countries of 1.3 million people, also known as Timor-Leste, [following visits to Indonesia](#) and [Papua New Guinea](#). Banners and billboards have filled the streets of the seaside capital, Dili, to welcome the pontiff.

“The pope’s visit is the biggest, the best marketing anyone can aspire to promote the country, to put the country on the tourist map,” East Timor’s President Jose Ramos-Horta said in an [interview with The Associated Press](#) on Wednesday.

The 74-year-old former independence fighter and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who [returned to the presidency](#) in 2022, said the papal visit is a “reward” for the depth of faith shown by the Timorese, some 98% of whom identify as Catholic, and recognition of the progress toward peace in recent years.

The World Bank in its semi-annual report in February praised East Timor as a peaceful, democratic nation. For more than 10 years, free and fair elections have been held despite tensions between the two largest parties that have occasionally erupted into violence.

The country's path to statehood has been traumatic.

The Timorese first declared their independence from Portugal, the colonial ruler, on Nov. 28, 1975, but that move was crushed nine days later when [neighboring Indonesia invaded](#). As many as 200,000 people were killed during the 24 years of Indonesian rule.

On Aug. 30, 1999, Timorese cast their ballots in a United Nations-backed referendum that backed independence from Indonesia with 78.5% of the vote. Indonesia’s military responded with a scorched-earth campaign that shocked the world. About 1,500 people were killed, more than 300,000 were displaced and over 80% of East Timor’s infrastructure was destroyed.

An international force led by Australia intervened to restore security. After a period of direct U.N. governance, East Timor finally became an independent state on May 20, 2002.

The transition to democracy has been rocky, with leaders battling poverty, unemployment and corruption. East Timor's economy is heavily dependent on energy resources in the Timor Sea, but according to the U.N. Human Development Index, oil and gas income is falling as reserves are depleted, and the economy is not yet diversified.

About 42% of the population lives below the poverty line, according to the U.N. Development Program.

Unemployment is high, job opportunities in the formal sector are generally limited and most people are subsistence farmers with no steady income.

In the health sector, 47% of children still suffer from stunting and for every 1,000 babies born in East Timor, 49 died before their 5th birthday due to malnutrition, according to the U.N.'s Group for Child Mortality Estimation. Nearly all medicines must be imported and supplies sometimes run out. Patients seek more advanced care overseas.

"Achieving national independence and managing the country afterward are not easy tasks," Koji Sakane, the director of Global Peacebuilding Association of Japan, said in his February study. "In other words, it is not easy for less experienced figures and organizations to provide the people with a stable living environment and gain their trust."

Out of necessity, Sakane said, the country was run by leaders and organizations who lacked experience in key areas, including coordination between competing political parties and control of ex-combatants and weapons from the struggle for independence.

While poverty levels remain high, East Timor joined the World Trade Organization last month as its 166th member, after 7 1/2 years of negotiations.

It also applied for a full membership in the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations](#). It currently has observer status, and wealthier members of the regional bloc like Singapore had feared it would be a burden and delay the creation of an ASEAN Economic Community.

Both East Timor's Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao and Ramos-Horta highlighted the importance of joining the 10-nation grouping of more than 700 million people to give foreign companies and investors the confidence and security to invest in the country. Last

In 2023, ASEAN member states adopted a roadmap for East Timor's full membership. It includes a requirement for East Timor to prepare a special budget to meet its obligations, such as building infrastructure to host ASEAN meetings and accommodate delegates.

As an ASEAN member, the island nation would have to attend 1,300 meetings a year, host summits, and contribute \$2.5 million per year to the group's budget.

"I can assure you that it's on the right track," said Milena Maria da Costa Rangel, East Timor's vice foreign minister for ASEAN affairs, adding that the government is involving the private sector and civil society to meet the criteria in the roadmap.

Ramos-Horta expects that East Timor will become a full member of ASEAN in 2025, under Malaysia's chairmanship.

However, economic analyst Fernando Dias Gusmao, from the Peace University in Dili, was more downbeat, saying the government has moved slowly to implement the roadmap.

East Timor continues to face challenges in terms of infrastructure, including the airports, accommodations and IT network necessary to host high-level meetings, Gusmao said.

"It was a big wish but the steps to make that wish come true are not yet optimal," Gusmao said.

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