

Crocodiles in the Timor Sea Seminar in Melbourne, Australia

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Thank you to the Timor-Leste Studies Association, to Monash University and to my friend, Sara Niner, for organizing this seminar.

I wanted to begin with a personal reflection on one of the many historic and defining moments I was privileged to be part of in the course of the long journey I have taken with Timor-Leste.

On the evening of 19 May 2002, the people of Timor-Leste celebrated their hard-won and costly struggle for national Independence under the gaze of the world. Bill Clinton was there, along with UN Sec-General Kofi Annan and a whole host of eminent others. Even the Indonesian President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, flew in for the occasion, and was a bit shocked, I think, to receive such a loud cheer from the many thousands of East Timorese gathered to witness the birth of their nation. Alexander Downer and John Howard were there, too, and were probably genuinely puzzled as to why their presence wasn't greeted with similar joyful effusiveness. After all, they were the saviours of the East Timorese people, were they not, having led the Interfet peacekeeping mission to restore peace and security after the August 1999 referendum?

“Australia's support for East Timor in 1999 was the most noble thing Australia has done in foreign policy in recent years”, Mr Howard is quoted as saying on the eve of the independence celebrations. While he and Mr Downer were in town, they decided to put noble thoughts and actions aside for just a bit and to get pragmatic. At Australia's insistence, the leadership of Timor-Leste was forced to make time in the course of the most significant day in its history to meet with Downer and Howard in order to sign the Timor Sea Treaty which would ensure that Australia and the resource companies could continue to exploit the oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. I recall feeling at the time, how arrogant of the Australian government to foist the signing upon Timor-Leste on such an important day, and at a time when Timor-Leste was still getting to its feet and was ill-prepared to participate in these negotiations. It was lacking in institutional and legal expertise, and fully reliant on hastily acquired outside advice. It was far from a level playing field, and Australia was fully conscious of this and the fact that the new and poor nation was in desperate need of the oil and gas money to commence rebuilding.

Just to give you some sense of the context at that time, I'd like to share with you an excerpt from my book, “*A Woman of Independence*.” The place is Dili and the date is early 2000, just two years prior to the signing of the Timor Sea Treaty. Like most of the leadership of the National Council for Timorese Resistance, Xanana and I were homeless. Our office was the living room of the house we ended up squatting in on the beachfront in Lecidere, Dili.

QUOTE – Page 295 of “*A Woman of Independence*,” (Pan MacMillan, 2003)

“We shared a large, two-storey building with a handful of CNRT members from the diaspora who, like us, were homeless.

The bare essentials of an office were set up in one of the three buildings that formed the complex. Here, around a long, fold-up table, Xanana conducted his meetings with all those who solicited his comments, advice and input on the tremendous range of initiatives and projects that were being generated by East Timor's partners – foreign governments, the UN, NGOs and individuals of good will – in the complex task of rebuilding. The Timorese had their work cut out just

feeding back on the strategies and action plans of others, leaving them little time and energy to devise any of their own.

At times I had the impression that the donor-driven machinery of the UN and the international community was speeding ahead like a high-powered locomotive that, in keeping to its own unrelenting schedule, hardly had time to stop and take the Timorese on board. The Timorese were grateful for the hand of friendship and support that was being extended to them by the international community. At the same time, it was difficult for them to feel that they were participating in the rebuilding effort on an equal footing with their benefactors. There was a yawning gap between the experienced and resource-rich donor institutions and East Timorese organisations such as the CNRT whose members from inside and outside the country had come together for the first time and were grappling with trauma and the immediate personal needs of their families at the same time as asserting themselves in the new and perplexing landscape of aid and donors and trust funds and UN bureaucracy. At times I felt like shouting out: “Stop, slow down! Just let these people deal with getting their family members home and a roof over their heads. Just let them breathe a little, let them reflect on the past before you drag them into your complicated plans for the future.”

The matter of the maritime boundary negotiations is, of course, first and foremost one of national sovereignty. It's not a question of which nation is more deserving of access to the resources in the Timor Sea, it is one of international law as it relates to seabed boundaries. Nevertheless, in light of the enormous gap in wealth and life conditions separating Australia and Timor-Leste, it is hard to ignore the need factor. Being an Australian by birth and an East Timorese by adoption, and having contributed in my own way to national development in Timor-Leste through my Alola Foundation, I feel fairly well qualified to make some observations about socio-economic needs in Timor-Leste. Let's consider a few facts:

In spite of some dramatic improvements since independence, Timor-Leste's infant mortality rate continues to be high at 44 deaths per 1000 live births. That's 12 times as many East Timorese children dying in childbirth than here in Australia.

If an East Timorese child survives childbirth, an event most commonly occurring in the home and with limited access to skilled medical personnel, close to 5 percent will die before they reach five years of age. That's an under five mortality rate 13 times higher than that recorded in Australia. By the time an East Timorese child reaches school age, he or she will in all likelihood not have attended pre-school or kindergarten, will face a 2 to 3 kilometre walk from and to home, be taught in a school without toilets, running water or a library and by a teacher doing his or her best to make do in the absence of adequate training and without access to basic learning materials.

The average Australian lives 15 years longer than a citizen of Timor-Leste. That might be because only 50% of East Timorese have access to clean water. Or that reliance on agriculture for subsistence means that hunger and malnutrition are still quite common at certain times of the year. It might also be due to the fact that a lack of education and access to basic services means that scores of East Timorese die each year of preventable diseases such as malaria and gastrointestinal infections. Given that treatment for cancer other than basic surgery is unavailable inside the country, a cancer diagnosis is a death sentence for all but the wealthy able to seek medical care abroad.

It is pretty clear which of our two countries is in greater need of the revenue flowing from future exploration of the Greater Sunrise oil field, valued at some 40 billion dollars. As participants attending Monday's symposium on the Timor Sea and Perspectives in International Law will know, if the maritime boundary between Timor-Leste and Australia was established based on the

median line principle, ie. equidistant between the two coastlines, every cent of revenue flowing from the Greater Sunrise field would belong to Timor-Leste.

Carefully managed, 40 billion dollars could go a long way towards addressing some, if not all, of the challenges in health and other the areas I have just mentioned. Timor-Leste's government, in partnership with foreign governments and civil society organisations, would have a good chance of achieving the ambitious goals for the nation set forth in the National Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030. With a massive investment in human capital development through improvements to the education system, scholarships, traineeships and upskilling for public servants, Timor-Leste would also have a better than average chance of reaching the Sustainable Development Goals. Infrastructure needs would not need to be met at the expense of health and education budgets. A robust social safety net could be established, taking the place of the currently very modest pension payments to the elderly and veterans of the resistance. Etc etc.

“Australia has a strong interest in a prosperous and stable Timor-Leste.” So says DFAT on the Timor-Leste page of its website on Australian aid to Timor. In order for this statement not to ring false and hollow in the ears of the people of Timor-Leste, Australia must immediately commence negotiations on that little gap in our maritime boundaries and give Timor-Leste a fighting chance to stand proud and strong and truly independent. Not only would this action close the Timor gap, but it would also end the decades-old misalignment of Australian public opinion and public policy in relation to Timor-Leste.

Over the two decades of Timor-Leste's courageous struggle for independence, individual Australians, Church groups, NGOs and human rights campaigners fought to keep the Timorese people's right to self-determination alive in the hearts and conscience of the Australian people. They drew attention to the complicity of western governments, including their own, in the systematic rape of Timor-Leste's resources and the massacre of untold numbers of innocent civilians by the Indonesian military. And since independence, new friends have emerged in the Australian community, organisations like Rotary, the RSL and the 40 odd friendship groups uniting local governments and their constituents in efforts to contribute to Timor-Leste's rebuilding. Many of these groups have been spurred to action for Timor-Leste out of a sense of duty and redress; the desire to make amends for successive Australian governments' failure to act with human decency and compassion, the desire to pay the debt of honour owed to the people of Timor-Leste for their support to Australian diggers during the 2nd World War. Such support cost the lives of between 40 and 60,000 East Timorese civilians, including innocent children. All of these friends of Timor-Leste, many of whom are present here today, should feel proud of the role they have played. They should also be outraged at the Australian government's refusal to grant our nearest neighbour a maritime boundary and access to the natural resources in the Timor Sea which it has a right, in international law, to exploit. If the friends of Timor-Leste could be relieved of the burden of raising 40 billion dollars in cake stalls, quiz nights and endless fund-raisers, secure in the knowledge that Timor-Leste enjoys a stable economic future in its own right, then we would all have the funds and energy to simply keep visiting beautiful Timor-Leste and reminding its people of our abiding friendship and solidarity. It's what good and honourable neighbours do, after all.

Thank you for listening to me this afternoon.