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United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor

## UNMISSET PRESS RELEASE

### *Suai Church Massacre Monument: 'UN committed to peace and reconciliation and to the cause of justice'*

(Dili, 4 March) – The Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Timor-Leste, Ambassador Kamallesh Sharma, reiterated yesterday the commitment of the UN as a whole to supporting the efforts for peace and reconciliation in Timor-Leste, and to the cause of justice. He was speaking in Suai [Cova Lima District] where he joined the RDTL President Xanana Gusmão, the Prosecutor-General Longuinhos Monteiro and other senior government and local officials at the ceremony to unveil the *Massacre Setembro Negro* [Black September Massacre] Monument to commemorate the victims of the 1999 Suai Church Massacre. “I join in honouring those who survived the terrible events here, and to praise their courage”, said the SRSG. He added that “we remember, with great agony, those who sacrificed their lives for their beliefs”, and that this memorial to “a monumental and unspeakable tragedy” in Timor-Leste should also be a warning and a symbol of determination that a terrible past is behind, and a bright future lies ahead. The SRSG said that the UN is also committed to assisting Timor-Leste in the growth of friendly and mutually beneficial relations with all its neighbours.

Earlier in the morning the SRSG attended the commemoration mass at Suai Church, and the burial of the remains of the victims at the base of the *Setembro Negro* Monument. Some 700 people followed the day’s ceremonies with those who could not enter the packed church listening to the mass on loudspeakers. The officiating priest, Father Luis, reminded those present that justice is necessary for reconciliation and forgiveness, and that ‘knowing the truth is a first step for justice’.

After the mass, PNTL officers and Timorese warriors in traditional attire carried the coffins containing the victims’ remains to the Monument, a few hundred metres up the road from the Church. Families and relatives of the deceased, mostly women and children, accompanied the coffins, carrying wreaths and flowers. They then waited patiently in the intense heat of the lunchtime sun until all the coffins were buried to lay their wreaths at the Monument. It was a moving moment with several of the relatives wailing and crying in mourning of the dead.

The Suai Church Massacre was included in a recent indictment issued by the Deputy Prosecutor General for Serious Crimes **[28 February 2003]**. The indictment specifically charges 14 Laksaur militia members with Crimes Against Humanity for their alleged participation in the massacre. At yesterday's ceremony, the Prosecutor General Longuinhos Monteiro thanked the community in Suai for helping the work of investigators and prosecutors with their testimonies.

On 6 September 1999, TNI soldiers, police and militia attacked people who had been sheltering inside the *Ave Maria* Church, killing more than 100 people, including 3 priests. In November 1999, the bodies of 31 victims were recovered from mass graves in West Timor and returned to East Timor. They remained in Dili until the Monument in Suai was completed, and were flown back to Suai on Monday by the forensic team of the Serious Crimes Unit.

(Photos available)

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