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UNMISSET PRESS RELEASE

SRSG attends inauguration of CAVR National Office: 'PEACE-BUILDING WORK A DAILY CHALLENGE THAT CAN ONLY BE DONE BY THE PEOPLE OF TIMOR-LESTE'

(Dili, 17 February) – The Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Timor-Leste, Ambassador Kamallesh Sharma, said today that the work of peace-building is ongoing and often difficult, and can only be conducted by the people of Timor Leste. He was speaking at the opening of the National Office of the Commission on Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) at the former Balide Prison in Dili. “This is a daily challenge, a commitment that must be reinforced in the everyday decisions of citizens, government officials, police officers and others”, said the SRSG, adding that the CAVR has an important role in helping Timorese citizens to play an active part in building a commitment to human rights and peace in Timor-Leste.

Balide was used as a prison until September 1999. Many thousands of Timorese have been interned there, especially after 1975. Thanks to a donation from Japan, the prison has now been refurbished and converted to serve as the CAVR National Office. Several former political prisoners who had been detained in Balide took part in today’s inauguration. The SRSG paid special tribute to them. “You stand here free today, carrying the memories of this and other places like it in your beautiful land”, the SRSG told the former prisoners, adding that they also stood for the many friends and colleagues who did not survive the suffering. “You have shown, through organizations such as the Association of Ex-Political Prisoners, tremendous leadership in the task of defending human rights in your new country”, said the SRSG.

During the reconstruction, the graffiti found on the walls was preserved. The cells used for solitary confinement were kept, save for the installation of lightning, as they were found so that visitors can see for themselves the conditions the prisoners were kept under. The SRSG said that the graffiti “continues to speak to us today”. “It reminds us of the suffering but also of the deep well of human strength and hope in the most difficult and testing times. It reminds us of the need, throughout the world, to ensure the protection of inalienable rights”, he added.

The RDTL President Xanana Gusmão, also speaking at today’s ceremony, said that the work of the CAVR is important in helping those who suffered to free themselves from the past trauma. “Many

people are not yet free”, said the President. He added that “ peace of mind means that people feel truly free: free from psychological or political pressure, free from economic or social tension, free from past trauma, free from daily shortcomings and free from fear of what tomorrow may bring”. But the President stressed that that the sacrifices of those who suffered will only be honoured when Timorese society reaches an equitable level of development, based on steadfast determination to eradicate poverty in the country. “It will be meaningless if we have all the perpetrators in jail but the people continue to face infant mortality, endemic and epidemic diseases, without a decent house, without clean water and food”, said Xanana Gusmão. He warned that without a change to the current poor standard of life, the grief lived in the past will not be healed and reconciliation will be a lot harder to achieve. “Peace and stability will continue to be a dream for the people of Timor-Leste”, he said.

The SRSB for his part congratulated the Commission on its achievements to date, and offered the support of UNMISSET in CAVR’S work and in its efforts towards the fulfillment of its humanist inspirations.

The opening of the National Office was followed with CAVR’s first themed National Public Hearing on political prisoners. The hearing will conclude tomorrow.

For further information contact:

Marcia Poole

Spokesperson/UNMISSET

Mobile: + 61 (0) 41 786 8485

Telephone: + 61 8 8946 3900 Ext. 6059