

By UNMISSET Spokesperson's Office

Dili, 10 December 2002

TIMOR-LESTE CELEBRATES HUMAN RIGHTS DAY AND SIGNS INTERNATIONAL RIGHTS TREATIES

International Human Rights Day was celebrated today in Timor Leste with an early morning mass in Dili, a festive parade with marching band and a formal signing ceremony by the Timor Leste Government of all seven core international human rights treaties.

Only hours before the official signing ceremony, the seven treaties as well as four optional protocols were adopted by the National Parliament by a vote of 74 votes in favour and one abstention. Timor-Leste became the 20th signatory to the Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers and their Families, thus bringing it into force, 12 years after it was adopted by the General Assembly.

Timor-Leste Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Jose Ramos-Horta thanked the country's leadership, including President Xanana Gusmão, Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and the Speaker of the National Parliament, Francisco Guterres, for the commitment in getting the documents quickly adopted and ratified. Prime Minister Alkatiri praised the ratification process saying that the defense of human rights and the struggle to uphold such rights was for the people of Timor-Leste an instrument, a culture and their driving force.

At the afternoon Human Rights Day Ceremony at GPA, Timor-Leste President Xanana Gusmão said, "If any nation in the world knows the meaning of human rights, it is Timor Leste". President Gusmão noted that today was the 54th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and said that declaration is enshrined in our Constitution".



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Mr. Gusmão said, "Ratifying these treaties must mean more than signing a piece of paper." He called it a solemn commitment by the people of Timor-Leste to "implement the human rights principles and standards that are included in them." He added, "This is not some academic exercise . . . the policies and actions of our efforts in leadership and governance must be based on human rights."

After signing the treaties and covenants, President Gusmão passed them to the Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG) Mr. Kamalesh Sharma who will forward them to the United Nations Registry.

On accepting the signed treaties and optional protocols, Mr. Sharma praised the Timor-Leste Government for its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights. You are "an example to other nations", he said.

Mr. Sharma told those attending the ceremony that "the signing of these treaties is as much a declaration to the world that the value of human dignity is cherished in Timor-Leste as it is an acceptance of international obligations". He said, "the struggle for independence was rooted in this value and in the determination to say "never again" to the violation of human rights".

Mr. Sharma said recent violence in Baucau and Dili "serves as a strong reminder of the importance of respect for human rights as an essential component of peace and stability". He added, "No society can prosper if respect for the key institutions that administer the rule of law is eroded".

Mr. Sharma noted the tendency when speaking of human rights for people to think principally about civil and political rights. He said "economic and social rights -- for example the right to an adequate standard of living, to education, and to health care -- are no less significant". He also said that a critical test of a community that respects human rights is how well it protects the rights of its most vulnerable groups. "Respect for human rights means tolerance" he said, "for those who are different, even if you do not share their beliefs, characteristics or practices".



MEDIA BRIEFING NOTE

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The SRSG said that the Governments accession to the treaties also commits it to certain reporting requirements. "I am pleased, he said, " to be able to confirm that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in cooperation with UNMISSET and UNDP, is working to provide an expert for a year to work in Timor-Leste to assist with reporting requirements".

International Human Rights Day festivities were not just restricted to Dili. In every Timor-Leste district, Vice Ministers of Justice and other Ministries and Secretaries of State paid visits to hospitals, prisons, schools and orphanages to emphasise the universality of human rights for all people in Timor-Leste. In addition, pamphlets visually depicting key human rights and human rights day bracelets were distributed throughout the districts.

The international treaties that were ratified today include: the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the Covenant Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; plus three optional protocols dealing with the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the Rights of the Child On the Involvement in Armed Conflict; and the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography and the second optional protocol dealing with Civil and Political Rights.

End

