

THE RISING SUN

Timor-Leste's
Journey to Peace
and Development



MURNI WAN MOHD NOR

NURUL FARHAH AB AZIZ

The Rising Sun: Timor-Leste's Journey to Peace and Development



Murni Wan Mohd Nor
and
Nurul Farhah Ab Aziz

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted, or disseminated in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher. To obtain permission, please email info@idfr.gov.my

All statements of facts, opinions, and expressions contained in this work are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute and the Government of Malaysia. The Government of Malaysia assumes no responsibility for any statement of facts or opinions expressed in this work.

PUBLISHED BY:

Institute of Diplomacy & Foreign Relations (IDFR),
Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia,
Jalan Wisma Putra,
50460 Kuala Lumpur,
MALAYSIA

First published in 2026.

Copyright © 2026 Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR)

COVER ILLUSTRATED BY:

Nadiah Almahdaly

Visit us at www.idfr.gov.my

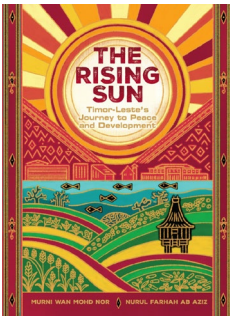


Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
National Library of Malaysia

ISBN 978-983-2220-44-2



The Rising Sun: Before colonisation, Timor-Leste was often described as *Loro Sa'e*, which in Tetum literally means "sun rising". The term symbolises renewal and independence, reflecting the nation's historical shift from Portuguese colonial rule and Indonesian occupation to the establishment of an independent Timor-Leste.

Red: The national struggle for liberation and self-determination.

Yellow: Traces of Timor-Leste's colonial past.

Black: The obscurantism that Timor-Leste has overcome.

White: Peace, which characterises Timor-Leste and its people.

Geometric patterns (*tais*): The patterns are inspired by *tais*, a hand-woven traditional textile unique to Timor-Leste. Recognised by UNESCO as an "intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding." A *tais* weaving requires intricate skill in spinning, dyeing, and weaving. It highlights the invaluable contributions of the Timorese women in creating this textile, which forms an essential part of Timor-Leste's national heritage.

Umu lulik/sacred house: These traditional, sacred houses hold deep cultural and spiritual significance. They are spaces for communal rituals and safekeeping of sacred heirlooms, symbolising the strong connection between the Timorese people, their ancestry, and the spiritual realm.

The crocodile: The crocodile represents the legend of *Lafaek*, in which a weary crocodile transforms into the island of Timor to provide a home for a boy who once showed it kindness. This myth reflects the core Timorese values of gratitude and mutual respect, elevating the crocodile to the status of a sacred ancestor known as *Avo Lafaek* (grandfather crocodile).

Corn and rice: Inspired by the symbols in Timor-Leste's national insignia, corn and rice - key agricultural products of the country - also symbolise wealth.

Coffee: As Timor-Leste's largest non-petroleum export, coffee has become a defining feature of the country's identity, renowned for the exceptional quality of its beans.

Sandalwood: Native sandalwood, known for its aromatic fragrance, holds significant historical, cultural, and economic importance. Once highly sought after by colonisers, it earned the nickname "invisible gold" due to its significant commercial and medicinal value.

The ocean: Timor-Leste has a beautiful coastline, with marine territory making up about 87 percent of its total area. The ocean is highly valued for its marine biodiversity, serving as a vital habitat for 30 of the world's 90 species of cetaceans, such as whales and dolphins. The marine ecosystems of Timor-Leste are essential to the blue economy, supporting the food security and livelihoods of its population.

Natural landscape and modern development: The contrast between pristine oceans, rugged mountains, and modern buildings reflect Timor-Leste's dual identity. It highlights the nation's commitment to development while preserving its natural beauty and cultural heritage, which is what makes Timor-Leste unique.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	viii
MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR GENERAL	x
PREFACE	xii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xiv
TIMOR-LESTE TIMELINE (ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE)	xvi
LIST OF ACRONYMS	xviii

Part I: Timor-Leste's Pre-Independence Journey (1975 -2002) 1

Chapter 1: Resistance and the Road to Self-Determination	4
Armed Struggle: Resistance in the Mountains	5
Clandestine Movement: The Underground Front	7
Diplomacy: The International Front	8
Role of the Catholic Church	9
Road to Self-Determination	10
The Scorched Earth Campaign and the Arrival of INTERFET	12
The Return of Freedom Fighters from Abroad	12
Chapter 2: The Philosophy of Reconciliation	24
CAVR and the <i>Chega!</i> Report: Processing the Past	24
The Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF): Diplomacy over Prosecution	25
Moving Forward: Forgiving the Past for Peace and Prosperity	27
The Power of the Community Reconciliation Process (CRP) and <i>Nabe Biti</i>	29
From Justice to Reparation: Shifting the Focus to Victims	31

Part II: Building the Nation from the Ground Up 35

Chapter 3: Leadership and Democracy	38
The Legitimacy of Historical Leaders	38
The Complementary Roles of Timor-Leste's Resistance Leaders	41
Humility, Inclusivity, and Resilience	43
Succession and the Next Generation of Leadership	45
Chapter 4: Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Boosting Economic Trajectory	49
The Human Capital Deficit and Linguistic Barriers	49
Changes in Public Service and Administrative Instability	50
Policy Inconsistency and Economic Uncertainty	51
The Infrastructure Gap: Connectivity and Basic Services	52
Developing Economic Infrastructure: The Greater Sunrise Project, Tibar and Suai Ports	54

Part III: Malaysia's Role - Commitment to Regional Inclusivity 61

Chapter 5: Consistent Support 64

Historical Apprehension	64
From Suspicion to Brotherly Trust: A Diplomatic Success Story	65
From Liaison Office to Embassy	66
Tun Mahathir Mohamad's State Visit 2003: A Symbol of Solidarity	68
Tangible Outcomes and Symbolic Gestures	69
Advocacy on the Global Stage	70
Rapid Deployment and the Peacekeeping Legacy	71
Operational Excellence and Trust	72
Inclusivity in Action: The Human Connection	73
Shared Cultural Affinity	74
Community Engagement and Celebration	74
A Teary Farewell	75

Chapter 6: Building Capacity 84

Strengthening Defence Post Conflict: The Malaysian Defence Cooperation Programme (MDCP)	84
Strengthening Institutions: Building the Ministry of Foreign Affairs	85
Embodying Inclusivity: Championing ASEAN Membership for Timor-Leste	87
Developing Human Capital: The Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP)	89
Scale and Scope of Support	89
Targeted Support for ASEAN Accession	90
Operational Issues and Adaptive Strategies	91
Scholarships	92
Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)	93
Institutional Collaboration: UniKL and IOB	93
Empowering the Grassroots: Rural Development	94

Chapter 7: The Road to ASEAN Membership 100

Cultural Integration and the "ASEAN Way"	101
Timor-Leste's Commitment to Meeting Requirements	103
Malaysia's Diplomatic Advocacy: The "Discount" Strategy	103
Prioritising Key Commitments	104
Institutional Dedication	105
Legal Readiness: Bridging the Regulatory Gap	106
Challenges of Accession	107
The Visa Exemption	109
Collaborative Support: Malaysia, Australia, and Partners	111

Part IV: Australia's Role - A Steadfast Partner **127**

Chapter 8: Consolidating Peace: From World War II to Capacity Building	128
Bonded by Gratitude and Friendship: The Legacy of World War II and the <i>Criados</i>	128
The Dare War Memorial	129
The INTERFET Legacy	130
Separating People from Politics	132
Continuing Police Cooperation	132
Timor-Leste Police Development Program (TLPDP)	133
Integrating Inclusivity in the TLPDP	134
Maritime Security and Sovereignty	135
Defence Cooperation Program (DCP)	136
Capacity Building for Timorese Security Personnel	136
Inclusivity in Current Training Modules for Timorese Security Personnel	137

Chapter 9: Major Development Partner	142
1: Empowering Timor-Leste's Democratic Pillars: Civil Society and the Grassroots	142
The "Country-Owned, Country-Led" Principle	143
Australian Aid: Supporting the Healthcare System	146
Vaccine Support	148
Nutrition Aid	149
Gender Equality	152
2: Capacity Building: Developing Timor-Leste's Human Capital	157
The Human Resource Crisis	157
PALM: Building Economic Resilience	158
TVET as a Pathway to Growth	159
Strengthening Education for Sustainable Development	160

Part V: Conclusion **165**

Chapter 10: Lessons on Forgiveness from Dili to the World	168
Partners by Choice: The Evolution of Timor-Leste–Indonesia Relations	168
A Model for Peace and Conflict Resolution	171
High Religious Tolerance and Inclusivity	172
Sustaining Peace	173

APPENDIXES	184
ENDNOTES	187

FOREWORD



Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad Bin Haji Hasan

Minister of Foreign Affairs

"The Rising Sun: Timor-Leste's Journey to Peace & Development", is a timely publication that captures Timor-Leste's steady progress toward sustainable peace, inclusivity, and development. It also highlights Malaysia's long-standing support for Timor-Leste's institutional strengthening and capacity building efforts, as well as Malaysia's advocacy for Timor-Leste's place within the ASEAN family.



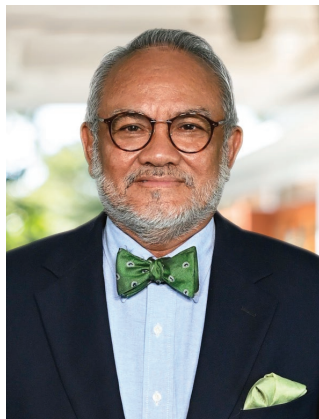
As ASEAN Chair in 2025, Malaysia was instrumental in bringing Timor-Leste into ASEAN's fold. Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN reinforces the message that peace and development are shared responsibilities. Furthermore, Timor-Leste's experience in building peace and inclusive governance offers practical lessons that can support ASEAN's long-term stability and sustainable growth.

Through qualitative research, field engagement, and thematic analysis, this publication provides further insight on Timor-Leste's post-conflict development. Among others, it highlights how inclusive peace processes, supported by strong political will, sound governance frameworks, and targeted technical assistance, have fostered stability and delivered tangible benefits to Timor-Leste and its people.

These findings provide practical insights into how these diverse forms of cooperation have fostered Timor-Leste's peacebuilding journey and institutional resilience, offering a unique model that aligns with ASEAN's broader goals of inclusivity and shared regional responsibility. In summary, this book sends a clear message that ASEAN remains strong when it is united, flexible, and focused on its people.

Highest congratulations to IDFR for applying rigorous scholarship and policy-relevant approaches in this book, which could serve as a useful reference and source of inspiration for further collaborative efforts in advancing a peaceful, inclusive, and resilient ASEAN region.

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR GENERAL



Dato' Zainol Rahim Zainuddin

Director General

The Rising Sun: Timor-Leste's Journey to Peace & Development exemplifies the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR)'s commitment to applied research that informs diplomatic practice and strengthens institutional learning. By examining Timor-Leste's transition, this work highlights a key pillar of regional cooperation — one underscored by Malaysia's long-standing partnership with the nation. This relationship was notably formalised when Malaysia became the first ASEAN country to establish its embassy in Dili on the eve of Timor-Leste's independence in 2002.



Since then, Malaysia–Timor-Leste relations have evolved through sustained cooperation in peacekeeping and capacity building. These efforts, supported by initiatives such as the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP) and the Malaysian Defence Cooperation Programme (MDCP), have been instrumental in enhancing Timor-Leste's institutional and human capital.

Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN on 26 October 2025 represents a milestone in regional integration. The book explores that transition by examining the trilateral cooperation between Timor-Leste, Malaysia, and Australia. Each partner brings distinct strengths to this cooperation: Timor-Leste offers first-hand lessons in recovery, while Malaysia and Australia provide continuity in technical expertise and capacity building. By analysing how these roles intersect, the publication demonstrates the impact of trilateral engagement in supporting inclusive and sustainable outcomes.

As IDFR's first publication focusing on this bilateral relationship, this book brings together research, policy, and practical experience into one place. It draws on the perspectives of government leaders and officials, as well as diplomats to provide useful and relevant insights for the wider community. Timor-Leste's experience offers a clear example of how evidence-based peacebuilding can support social cohesion and reconciliation, with lessons that are relevant beyond its borders.

It is my hope that this publication will serve as a useful reference for those engaged in regional cooperation and encourage continued collaboration among partners committed to sustainable peace and development.



PREFACE



As an academic, nothing excites me more than pursuing a meaningful project. The process of writing this book brought many “firsts” for me – from interviewing the President of Timor-Leste, to embarking on an off-road adventure through the mountains of Mindelo beyond Dili to visit the site where Timor-Leste’s first Prime Minister, Nicolau Lobato was killed, and experiencing the warmth of celebrations with the people of this resilient nation. If I close my eyes, I can still recall those moments: the crisp mountain air, the laughter of children, and the genuine smiles of the Timorese people.

I was a stranger to them; hence I consider it a privilege to have been invited not only to observe but also to participate in their celebrations. Being the only female *hijabi* in attendance, I stood out – yet I was met with nothing but kindness and generosity. I was honoured in ways I did not feel I deserved, but for which I remain deeply grateful. This experience affirmed something that I had previously only read about: the people of Timor-Leste are wonderfully diverse, culturally rich, and genuinely inclusive.

It is an honour to write this book but I must admit, it is one of the most daunting tasks in my career. The responsibility of representing the people of Timor-Leste accurately by encapsulating their transition from a post-conflict to a peaceful nation is not lost on me, and we make no claims that this book covers all aspects of Timor-Leste’s complex-yet-inspiring journey. In addition, we are also unable to document the vastness of Malaysian and Australian support in its entirety, yet we have done our best to capture the main pillars and impact of the assistance given – all of which hopefully highlights the importance of trilateral cooperation. That said, the main focus of our book is on the resilient nation of Timor-Leste. We intentionally wanted to highlight their journey to peace because a nation’s unity, social harmony, and ensuing development can only be achieved when there is lasting peace and stability amongst the people.



One of the defining qualities of Timor-Leste and its people is their peaceful and inclusive nature. Yet even the strongest bonds can break if their foundations are not maintained, and threats to their stability are not addressed. In this regard, Malaysia and Australia have consistently supported Timor-Leste – even before the restoration of its independence — to facilitate and sustain its development across key areas such as security and defence, capacity building, governance, and its ASEAN accession.

It is both heartening and rare in the course of data collection across different levels of society, for a researcher to encounter unanimous and positive views of a foreign nation's support for their own country. But I realised that the sincerity of a nation's actions will always be remembered. Across interviews conducted at various levels of society, participants emphasised Malaysia's steadfast support from the early days of Timor-Leste's path to independence, through its post-conflict recovery, and continuing into its present development. These contributions have eased the process of its accession to ASEAN on 26 October 2025.

This milestone is a testament to the determination and resilience of Timor-Leste and its people in meeting the requirements for entry into ASEAN. It also highlights the importance of collective action and inclusivity in welcoming ASEAN's newest Member State. When one nation prospers, the region as a whole benefits. Being entrusted with writing this book is an honour I find difficulty to fully express in words. It is my hope that this work reflects in some measure the remarkable journey of Timor-Leste and underscores the significance of regional collaboration.

Murni Wan Mohd Nor
2026



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is special to us because it reflects the generosity of the many individuals who took time out of their busy schedules to share their insights with us. Through their contributions, this book has become a narrative grounded in the lived experiences of key players who were pivotal to Timor-Leste's journey before and after independence, as well as its path to ASEAN.

Building a nation that has endured violent conflicts in the past and prioritising peacebuilding through forgiveness is no mean feat. The leaders of Timor-Leste and those of its neighbours were instrumental in demonstrating that reconciliation is the most meaningful way forward. Yet, reconciliation would not be possible without the people who were willing to forgive and work together towards a shared future. In this regard, we are deeply grateful to the academics, community leaders, activists and ordinary citizens of Timor-Leste who agreed to be interviewed. Many of them had to revisit deeply personal and painful memories, shaped by personal hardship and loss during the struggle for sovereignty. We are truly humbled by their willingness to share their stories, and we hope to honour them by accurately reflecting their experiences in this book.

The Rising Sun: Timor-Leste's Journey to Peace & Development is the result of collaborative efforts among Timor-Leste, Malaysia, and Australia. In-depth interviews were conducted across all three countries, necessitating extensive planning, coordination and strategic liaison to synthesise perspectives from the three nations. As such, we wish to express our sincere appreciation to Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the ASEAN-Malaysia National Secretariat, the Embassy of Malaysia in Timor-Leste, the Embassy of Australia in Timor-Leste, the Embassy of Timor-Leste in Malaysia, the office of the President in Dili, Timor-Leste, the Australian High Commission in Malaysia, and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for their invaluable support.

Considerable time and effort also went into the identification of relevant visual materials and obtaining the necessary permissions from respective copyright owners, to enable their inclusion in this book. We therefore extend our gratitude to the Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA), the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the Communication and Public Diplomacy Division of MOFA, the National Archives of Australia, the United Nations Photo Library (Multimedia Resources Unit), as well as to individuals who shared photographs from their personal collections.



Specifically, we would like to thank the Director General of the Institute of Diplomacy & Foreign Relations (IDFR), Dato' Zainol Rahim Zainuddin, for his trust in entrusting us with this book project as well as for his guidance in navigating complex and nuanced issues, which greatly facilitated the book's completion. Our appreciation also goes to Puan Maslina Ngah Mamud, IDFR's Director of the Centre for Political Studies and Economic Diplomacy, and Dato Westmoreland Palon, IDFR's Director of the Centre for Competency Enhancement, for connecting us with key individuals within the Ministry who possessed the relevant expertise for our interviews, as well as for their constructive feedback and advice whenever we encountered any challenges during the course of researching and writing this book.

We would like to make special mention of our youngest researcher, Puan Munirah Mahmud, whose contributions were instrumental to the success of this book. She is a perfect example that being young does not necessarily translate to a lack of experience or maturity. Her meticulous attention to detail in addressing tedious, technical aspects, her organisational capabilities in managing administrative matters, and her steadfast commitment to research accuracy were exemplary, reflecting a level of professionalism and maturity beyond her years. We would also like to thank En Ahmad Khairul, Dr Muhammad Faiz, En Ahmad Muziru, and all members of our Centre for their invaluable assistance in various capacities. We are truly blessed to be part of such a dedicated and supportive team, and we look forward to working together on future projects.

Lastly, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to our families for their encouragement, patience, and understanding throughout this process. The demands of this work required periods of travel and time away from our loved ones, which is never easy on the heart; however, their unwavering support provided us with the reassurance and peace of mind necessary to carry out our responsibilities.

There are many others who have contributed to this book, both directly and indirectly, though we are unable to acknowledge each one by name. Contributors across different fields and countries have assisted us in meaningful ways. Through this project, we have gained invaluable knowledge, cherished experiences, and developed friendships that we hope will last a lifetime – an outcome that, in itself, means everything to us.



TIMOR-LESTE TIMELINE

1974

**COLONIAL
LEGACY
(16th Century)**

Portuguese
Administration
of Timor-Leste

1974-1975

**DECOLONISATION
& FIRST
INDEPENDENCE**

Carnation Revolution
(Portugal)
Unilateral Proclamation
of Independence

1975-1999

**INDONESIAN
OCCUPATION
AND RESISTANCE**

Indonesia Invasion
(7 December 1975)

Annexation as
Timor Timur

1999-2002

**SELF-DETERMINATION
AND UN TRANSITION**

UN-supervised referendum
(30 August 1999)

UNTAET Administration
(1999 -2002)





ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE



LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACCWG	ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
AFP	Australian Federal Police
ALMA	Apoiui ba Lideransa, Mentoria no Aprendizajen (Support to Leaders, Teachers, and Learning)
AMNS	ASEAN-Malaysia National Secretariat
APSC	ASEAN Political-Security Community Council
APSCD	ASEAN Political-Security Community Division (APSCD)
APTC	Australia Pacific Training Coalition
ASCC	ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAVR	Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation
CBP	Capacity Building Programme
CLMV countries	Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam
CNC	Centro Nacional Chega!
CRP	Community Reconciliation Process
CSOs	Civil society organisations
CTF	Commission of Truth and Friendship
DCP	Defence Cooperation Program
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DPP	Development Partnership Plan
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EPI	Expanded Programme on Immunization
F-FDTL	Falintil-Forças de Defesa de Timor-Leste (Falintil-Defence Forces of Timor-Leste).
FALINTIL	Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste (The Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor)
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FPCI	Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia
FPU	Formed Police Unit
FRETILIN	Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor)
GBV	Gender-Based Violence

GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
GERTAK	Gerakan Perempuan Anti-Kekerasan (Women's Movement Against Violence)
GPS	Gender, Peace, and Security
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
HAFOUN	The Holistic Agriculture, Food and Nutrition
ICADD	International Cooperation and Development Division
IDFR	Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INFRA	Institute for Rural Advancement
INTAN	Institut Tadbiran Awam Negara (National Institute of Public Administration)
INTERFET	International Force East Timor
IOB	Institute of Business
IPE	Indo-Pacific Endeavour
JAIF	Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund
KKDW	Kementerian Kemajuan Desa dan Wilayah (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development)
LOI	Letter of Intent
MDCP	Malaysian Defence Cooperation Programme
MDRHC	Ministry of Rural Development and Community Housing
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MITI	Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry
MTCP	Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NCP	New Colombo Plan
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
ODF	Official Development Finance
PALM	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility
PHD	Partnership for Human Development
PLS	Pacific Labour Scheme
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
PMSP	Pacific Maritime Security Program
PNTL	Polícia Nacional de Timor-Leste (National Police of Timor-Leste)



R4D	Roads for Development
RENETIL	National Resistance of Students of Timor-Leste
RMP	Royal Malaysian Police
ROI	Return on Investment
SCU	Serious Crimes Unit
SDP	Strategic Development Plan
SEANWFZ	Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone
SILA	Sekretariat Induk Logistik ASEAN (ASEAN Main Logistics Secretariat)
SOM	Senior Officials' Meeting
SPC	Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres
SPSC	Special Panels for Serious Crimes
SSAS-PR	The Civil Society and Social Support Service
SWP	Seasonal Worker Program
TLPDP	Timor-Leste Police Development Program
TNI	Tentara Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Armed Forces)
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations
UNAMET	United Nations Mission in East Timor
UNCPOC	United Nations Comprehensive Protection of Civilians
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UniKL	Universiti Kuala Lumpur
UNMEOM	United Nations Military Expert on Mission
UNMISSET	United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor
UNMIT	United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste
UNOTIL	United Nations Office in Timor-Leste
UNPOL	United Nations Police
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNTAET	United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WTO	World Trade Organisation

PART I

Timor-Leste's Pre-Independence Journey (1975-2002)



TIMOR-LESTE





Chapter 1: Resistance and the Road to Self-Determination

There is much to observe in the young nation of Timor-Leste. The country encompasses an area of 14,954 square kilometres with a modest population of 1.52 million people, of which the gender distribution is almost one to one. Dili, the capital city, is the most densely populated municipality in the country with a population of approximately 250,000 people.¹ Dili's attraction may be attributed to the prospects of economic prosperity associated with being the capital city. In contrast, the other municipalities are predominantly rural, suggesting significant potential for further development in these areas. While that may be true, our fieldwork observations indicate that the beauty of Timor-Leste lies in its largely untouched natural environment, which makes for breathtaking views from its jagged mountain peaks to its expansive coastal waters.

However, Timor-Leste's most defining characteristic remains the resilience and cultural diversity of its people. To fully appreciate the Timor-Leste of today, we tried to understand the history that was defined by an arduous struggle for self-determination and the enduring spirit that shaped its independence. Timor-Leste was part of the Portuguese territory from the 16th century, until Portugal withdrew its presence from Timor-Leste in 1975. However, this withdrawal did not automatically translate to freedom for the Timorese to govern their own country. Instead, the struggle for independence became even more complex. On 28 November 1975, Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor known as FRETILIN), unilaterally declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. However, the joy of liberation was short-lived. A mere nine days later, on 7 December 1975, Indonesia began its occupation of Timor-Leste, which would endure for the next 24 years.

Indonesia's administration of Timor-Leste was said to be motivated by the desire to seal the power vacuum that resulted when former colonies were left without what was perceived to be a strong or legitimate governance. In this regard, Indonesia's occupation and subsequent integration of Timor-Leste were meant to secure regional

stability.² However, the Timorese have the inalienable right to self-determination, which is enshrined in Article 1 of the *United Nations Charter*. Thus, the resistance against the occupation was a natural and necessary step for the Timorese.

The struggle was by no means easy. The Indonesian military possessed overwhelming conventional superiority in both personnel and advanced weaponry. While the exact number is difficult to determine, it is estimated that 200,000 Timorese were killed during the conflict, or died due to disease or malnutrition.³ Former Ambassador of Timor-Leste to the Kingdom of Cambodia and New Zealand, Ms Felicidade de Sousa Guterres, a female veteran of the resistance, reflected on her experience during the three years (1975-1978) where she had given support from the depths of the Matebian Mountain jungle. She recalled the dire situation at that time: "At the end of 1978, it was very hard because they dropped the bombs from the military aircraft... So, in just three months, maybe more than 50,000 people were killed."⁴

Yet the fighting spirit of the Timorese could not be dampened. The resistance maintained its momentum by employing a strategic, multi-pronged approach comprising the armed front, the underground movement or clandestine front operating within towns and villages, and the diplomatic front focused on raising international awareness and mobilising support for the liberation movement to restore independence.

Armed Struggle: Resistance in the Mountains

The first pillar of the Timorese resistance was its armed wing, the Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste (the Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor known as FALINTIL), which faced the Indonesian military directly. In the early stages of the occupation, the resistance initially adopted armed struggle utilising conventional warfare, but had to pivot into a guerilla strategy when they were forced into the mountains for their safety. This period is often characterised by the "encirclement and annihilation" campaigns, which employed aerial bombardment to overpower resistance strongholds and disrupt supply lines to the civilian population seeking refuge in the highlands.⁵

Ms Felicidade Guterres described the deprivation they endured during that time. There was an absence of the most basic necessities, and this forced the Timorese to forage for whatever food they could find. She explained the challenges they faced:

*"I was involved in the resistance from the beginning and I started as a youth leader and political assistant. At that difficult time, we moved around to carry out our duty and walked bare footed, and wore simple, handmade traditional clothes. . . we didn't have enough food, just took anything we could get to eat."*⁶

The strategy of encirclement was deliberately imposed for a reason: to induce starvation and drive the population out of the resistance-controlled areas. The bleak situation forced the leaders of the resistance to pursue guerilla warfare in the mountains, which was more mobile and efficient. This meant that civilians who had worked together with the combatants had to surrender and move back into the towns. There, they continued to support the movement towards liberation through alternative, non-combat roles.

In addition, the conflict placed specific and disproportionate burdens on women. Ms Leonésia Tecla da Silva, a peace mediator and civil society leader in Timor-Leste, highlighted the invisible sacrifices of women who supported the resistance. She explained that many female fighters who were pregnant in the jungle faced agonising and impossible choices:

*"If you're pregnant, you cannot keep your baby. You have to put the name and you have to leave somewhere. . . The people will collect and give to the nun, but you cannot take your baby. You have guns, you're fighting."*⁷

This testimony sheds light on the profound personal costs borne by women, many of whom today are still searching for the children they were forced to leave behind.

Ms da Silva's own family, like many others in Timor-Leste at that time, was exposed to significant risks to their safety. She recounted her mother's experience of having to leave her behind with other family members to join the resistance in the jungle, where her mother even narrowly escaped rape.

These narratives highlight that the armed struggle was not merely a political strategy, but a deeply lived reality of trauma that permeated the lives of all Timorese. While the entire population endured hardship, women in particular faced distinct and gendered challenges which shaped their experiences of resilience.

Clandestine Movement: The Underground Front

While the armed front focused its resistance efforts in the mountains, the clandestine front operated within the towns and villages, providing essential logistical and intelligence support. This network greatly assisted the fighters and maintained the morale of the Timorese. Although they were not bearing arms and facing the Indonesian military directly, they were not in a "safer" position. The clandestine front was very much a high-risk operation that relied on the collective confidentiality of the people to ensure their movements and activities were not made known to the occupying forces.

This meant that the clandestine movement had to use its ingenuity to come up with alternative means to transport supplies without being detected. Ms Lusitania Lopes, a human rights lawyer and former interpreter for the United Nations (UN)'s Serious Crimes Unit (SCU), shared with us about the development of the *kaisa* (box) system, which was used to bring essential supplies to FALINTIL. Through this system, the lists of required supplies were communicated by the armed fighters in the mountains, and the communities in the towns and villages would mobilise and collect what was required.

Ms Lopes explained that even the act of getting basic necessities was fraught with danger, requiring careful planning and creative strategy to ensure the success of their tasks. For instance, the youth in the village would invite the military to play volleyball as a form of diversion, allowing supplies to be discreetly transported to the freedom fighters in the mountains. Such accounts illustrate that the effectiveness of the clandestine movement needed the involvement of the entire community.

Beyond logistical assistance, the clandestine front also demonstrated remarkable skill in evasion and survival. Ms Felicidade Guterres and many others like her were

forced to play dual roles to avoid being identified as part of the resistance. By day, she carried out her duties as a civil servant within the Indonesian administration, while by night, she secretly engaged in underground clandestine activities to support the resistance. In December 1978, she came back to her home town in Baguia and then joined the clandestine front to continue the struggle for independence. Ms Felicidade Guterres was skilful in evasion and survival. She recalled the moment she experienced home arrest, where she sought assistance from a Priest, the late Padre João de Deus Pires, to escape and head towards safety.

Ms Felicidade Guterres's experiences highlight that the danger faced at the time was not only imminent for armed combatants in the mountains. The clandestine front in the towns and cities were equally at risk, too. They displayed immense courage in assisting the armed resistance, without which the liberation movement would not have been successful.

Diplomacy: The International Front

The third pillar of the resistance, but equally important as the rest, was the diplomatic front. The primary strategy was to raise awareness about, and lobby support for self-determination. Whilst the armed and clandestine front worked on the ground of their homeland, the diplomatic front played a key role in engaging with leaders of other countries, the UN, as well as other international and human rights organisations to condemn the occupation of Timor-Leste and create pressure that would result in its independence.

The diplomatic front was not without its challenges. Professor Braithwaite (2012) notes that for many years, leaders from more powerful nations had acquiesced to the occupation and neglected to use their influence to prevent further harm.⁸ Despite these obstacles, key figures remained steadfast in their advocacy. Among them was the President of Timor-Leste, Dr José Ramos-Horta, who lived many years in exile prior to independence. Nevertheless, exile did not diminish his spirit to advocate for the liberation of the Timorese people. His persistent efforts in peacefully advocating for freedom and consistency in bringing human rights abuses to light would later earn him the honour of being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996.

The diplomatic efforts at the international stage were further strengthened by the Timorese diaspora and student movements abroad. For example, the National Resistance of Students of Timor-Leste (RENETIL) were very active in bringing attention to the Timorese struggle for independence, particularly during high-profile events conducted in Indonesia itself. Ms Maria de Lurdes Martins de Soussa Bessa, the current Ambassador of Timor-Leste to the Kingdom of Belgium, recalled one such protest staged in front of the US Embassy in Jakarta:

*"There was a lot of world leaders in Jakarta [for the APEC leaders' summit in Bogor]. A group of 29 students entered the United States Embassy. Instead of discussing about the summit, everyone was discussing about the young guys inside the premises of the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta. And luckily enough, they were heard."*⁹

Ms Lurdes Bessa herself was once a student activist who was forced to live in exile in Portugal since 1976. She described the evolution of the external resistance which she was personally involved in:

*"At a very early stage, I became an activist back in Portugal. Just making sure that we created awareness. . . when no one wanted to know about Timor-Leste. So, at a very early stage at school, I became an activist, just trying to create awareness."*¹⁰

The coordinated efforts between students and activists in Indonesia, Portugal, Australia, and other parts of the world demonstrated the expansive reach of the diplomatic front's influence in generating global interest in, and support for, the right of Timor-Leste's self-determination. The consistent efforts from the diplomatic front, together with the armed and clandestine movement in the homeland, was the formula needed to exert pressure on the occupying nation into making the necessary political changes – all of which facilitated the path for the restoration of Timor-Leste's independence.

Role of the Catholic Church

Although the Catholic church did not constitute a formal pillar of the resistance strategy, its role was nevertheless pertinent to the survival of the Timorese. The

Church provided much-needed sanctuary to anyone afflicted during the conflict, which gave respite from violence and spiritual comfort during the most testing times.¹¹ In addition, the use of Tetum in liturgical language created the loophole needed to circumvent the Indonesian restrictions on usage of the Portuguese language. Using Tetum also reinforced a sense of national identity separate from the occupiers. All these factors may have contributed to the surge in the number of Timorese who converted to Catholicism at the end of the fight for independence.¹² Moreover, local priests and nuns courageously risked their own lives for the protection of the people who were seeking safety from military violence.

In many ways, the Catholic Church in Timor-Leste served as a vital link to the outside world, similar to the role played by the diplomatic front. They also advocated for the end of the occupation by bringing the truth about the violence and human rights abuses conducted to the attention of the world. Here, particular recognition must be accorded to the leadership of Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, who shared the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize with President Ramos-Horta. Drawing upon his moral authority and international standing, the Bishop had relentlessly denounced military atrocities that occurred in Timor-Leste at the time, and called for a UN-supervised referendum on self-determination. In a powerful letter addressed to the former UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, the Bishop argued for the autonomy of the Timorese by asserting that the people must "decide their own destiny, freely, consciously", while warning that "we are dying as a people and a nation."¹³ Although the Church is often less prominently acknowledged than the three primary pillars of the resistance, its role was no less important. By providing physical sanctuary, spiritual comfort, and a unifying sense of national identity, the Catholic Church effectively became an extension of the resistance – a moral line of defence that helped bind the armed, clandestine, and diplomatic movements into a united resistance.

Road to Self-Determination

The Timorese people's consistent use of political strategies, encompassing the armed, clandestine, and diplomatic fronts, ultimately succeeded in compelling the international community's collective action against the occupation. In 1999, following intense international pressure and the democratisation of Indonesia, then President of

Indonesia, B.J. Habibie agreed to a UN-supervised Popular Consultation to determine whether the Timorese people would agree to special autonomy within Indonesia or reject it. This marked a pivotal moment in Timorese history which led to the self-determination of Timor-Leste. The United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) was responsible for managing the 1999 referendum,¹⁴ which was not an easy task, as tensions were rife in the country. Despite the dangerous situation, the voter turnout on 30 August 1999 reached an extraordinary 98.6 percent. On 4 September 1999, the results were announced. Specifically, 78.5 percent of the population had voted for the right to self-determination, which meant integration with Indonesia was rejected by the people.¹⁵

The Timorese displayed incredible courage by turning up in droves on voting day under the constant threat of violence, viewing their participation as an extension of the broader struggle for independence. For example, Ms Felicidade de Sousa Guterres served as a witness to the vote-counting process in Comoro during that time. Facing threats of violence, she made the heartwrenching decision to separate from her five-year-old daughter to fulfill her duty, unsure if either of them would survive.¹⁶ Her resolve was motivated by the ethos of the resistance, as reflected in the Timorese philosophy made popular in the song, *Mate ka Moris! Ukun Rasik An* — commonly understood as “Death or life! Independence”.¹⁷ She recalled her conversation with the nun who agreed to hide her child:

“After I got an instruction from my team leader, Padre Filomeno Jacob, I said to the Nun Madre Paola Battagliola, the leader of the Convent where we hid. ‘Nun, I’m going now, but just look after my daughter. I’m not sure if I will be back... If I’m not coming back, Nun please give her to my family who are still alive, if not, keep [her] with you.’ ”¹⁸

What Ms Felicidade Guterres had in mind when she made the difficult decision that any parent should not have to make was the 24-year struggle. Despite the conflicting emotions she faced when she had to leave her daughter behind for her own protection, Ms Felicidade Guterres was willing to sacrifice herself, as she had done all that she could during those difficult times of the resistance. The actions of the people clearly showed their desire for independence, yet this was unfortunately met with a campaign of retribution by the Indonesian military and pro-Indonesian militias.

The Scorched Earth Campaign and the Arrival of INTERFET

The announcement of the pro-independence result was met with the Scorched Earth campaign, which resulted in the death of many lives.¹⁹ Considerable disruption was posed to the country's infrastructure during this period,²⁰ which coincided with a large-scale displacement of Timorese to West Timor.²¹

Ms Maria de Lurdes Martins de Sousa Bessa recalled the terror conveyed by her family in Dili while she was in Portugal. When she called them to celebrate the referendum results, believing that freedom of her people was near, the response of her family pictured the grim reality they faced back home, "You guys celebrate abroad. We're just waiting to die here."²²

The Return of Freedom Fighters from Abroad

During the critical period where the struggle for independence was ongoing between 1999 to 2002, Timorese freedom fighters who were previously forced to leave the country due to ongoing violence had returned to join forces with those who had remained. Ms Lurdes Bessa was one of the many who had returned to Dili in 1999. She vividly recalled the environment of devastation and destruction in her homeland:

"I remember seeing a man being killed in front of me. And this was, I think it was on the 31st of December, 1999... And, you know, I remember getting sick after that. I stayed in bed for a week with high fever. And then I thought to myself, I have two options, I just don't react and I don't know what will happen, or I just get off the bed and I react."²³

Despite the destruction, the resilience of her people stood out in stark contrast:

"Dili was burned out... But, you had this feeling that they were happy, somehow. And one thing that also stayed in my head was the kids playing as if there hadn't been anything. You know, they're just running in the streets laughing. And when it rained, they used the banana leaves as an umbrella. That is an image that never leaves my head. It's just beautiful. And the laugh, the laugh of the children really helps."²⁴

Ms Lurdes Bessa's description of her people's indomitable spirit was something we observed during our research trip to Dili. There is no denying that the Timorese are remarkable people who are able to find joy despite difficulties, and happiness despite suffering loss. This resilience undoubtedly played a crucial role in sustaining their decades-long struggle for independence; a struggle marked by profound sacrifice and violence.

To stop further loss of lives and restore order following the announcement of the referendum results, the UN authorised the deployment of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET), a multinational peacekeeping force led by Australia, to intervene in Timor-Leste. Regional neighbours, particularly Malaysia and Australia, played a critical role during this time, as highlighted by President Ramos-Horta. He noted the speed of Malaysia's and Australia's response following the political decision to intervene:

*"From the moment the political decision was made by Malaysian government to deploy the Malaysian contingent, within six days they were in Timor-Leste... Australia took three days because they already knew, they were following the situation, they were ready to come anytime."*²⁵

This swift intervention was very much needed, as it helped in the cessation of violence, and marked the beginning of Timor-Leste's formal transition to independence. The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) was established by the UN Security Council Resolution 1272, granting it the authority to administer the territory and prepare it for self-government.²⁶

Following the stabilisation achieved by INTERFET, the focus shifted from establishing physical security to the technical creation of a state. The UNTAET mission was unique in history, as the UNTAET was granted executive and legislative power to govern the territory during its transition to sovereignty. A key milestone during this period was the establishment of the East Timor Transitional Administration (ETTA) in August 2000. This allowed Timorese leaders to work alongside international administrators, ensuring that the new state truly reflected local political aspirations rather than just an international blueprint.

On 30 August 2001, exactly two years after the referendum, the Constituent Assembly was elected. This body was tasked with the responsibility of drafting the nation's first constitution. Over the course of several months, the elected members deliberated on the structural foundations of the new state, ultimately deciding on a semi-presidential system. The formal promulgation of the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on 22 March 2002 provided the foundation for state governance, enshrining democratic norms and recognising Portuguese and Tetum as official languages.²⁷ More broadly, the document served as a symbolic "social contract", signalling that Timor-Leste was prepared to administer its own affairs, which had been denied to them for so long.

The final milestone before the restoration of independence was the presidential election held on 14 April 2002, which resulted in a landslide victory that belonged to Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, the current Prime Minister and former commander of FALINTIL. His election as the nation's first President symbolised the unification of the armed, clandestine, and diplomatic fronts under a single head of state, bridging the gap between the revolutionary era and institutionalised democratic administration. On the night of 19 May 2002, at Tasi Tolu, the UN Secretary-General at the time, Mr Kofi Annan, officially handed over the reins of government. At midnight on 20 May 2002, the UN flag was lowered, and replaced by the flag of Timor-Leste, marking the rise of Timor-Leste as a new sovereign nation. The words of Mr Annan during the flag-raising ceremony still ring true today,

"None of us who followed Timor-Leste's long struggle for self-determination can help being moved by this moment. None of us can forget the sacrifices made by the people or the courage of its leadership. Even before this day, Timor-Leste showed that greatness among nations is not a matter of size or resources, but rather one of global citizenship and adherence to the highest principles of our Charter."²⁸

The road to self-determination for the Timorese was neither straightforward nor easy, and tremendous sacrifices were made to restore independence on 20 May 2002. This period is a testament to the resilience of a nation and its people who were willing to die for their freedom and the liberation of their homeland. There is hardly one family in Timor-Leste that is not marked by devastating loss of life and property, yet forgiveness and reconciliation finally gave Timor-Leste true freedom from the horrors of the past.



President Ramos-Horta and Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo (known as Dom Belo) were awarded the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo for their efforts towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Timor-Leste.

Credit: Archive files from the Media Team of the President's Palace, Dili.



View of burned-out buildings on a street in Dili during the transition to independence.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Eskinder Debebe.



Ms Felicidade Guterres, during her days as part of the resistance, photographed while visiting Prime Minister Gusmão in Cipinang prison, Jakarta.

Credit: Ms Felicidade Guterres' personal collection.



View of houses in the Becora district of Dili, where the UNTAET contingent was on security patrol during the transition to independence.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Eskinder Debebe.



UNMIT officer comforts a rape victim.
Credit: UN Photo, photographer Martine Perret.





The UNTAET medical team conducts a medical examination.

Credit: The United Nations, photographer Eskinder Debebe.

Ms Felicidade Guterres was a member of a women's organisation named GERTAK (Gerakan Perempuan Anti Kekerasan). She is pictured here, during her participation in the Indonesian Women's Coalition Congress in Jogjakarta, Indonesia in 1989. GERTAK demanded for 1) cessation of Indonesian military operations in Timor-Leste; 2) release of all Timorese political prisoners; and 3) UN-supervised referendum for Timor-Leste.

Credit: Ms Felicidade Guterres' personal collection.



United Nations peacekeepers make benches and desks for a school outside Dili.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Eskinder Debebe.



UNTAET contingent accompanied by a group of local children as they conduct a security patrol in the Becora district.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Eskinder Debebe.



An electoral officer assisted by UNPOL to distribute electoral material in preparation for Timor-Leste parliamentary elections.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Martine Perret.



Residents of Dili wait patiently for the opening of the voting station during the run-off presidential election in Timor-Leste.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Martine Perret.



Internally displaced families in Timor-Leste finally return home after stability is restored.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Martine Perret.

Chapter 2: The Philosophy of Reconciliation

The establishment of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste as a sovereign state was a complex process, as the newly independent nation had to heal from the consequences of violent conflict. This is what contributed to the resilience of Timor-Leste and its people. After experiencing atrocities that resulted in the displacement of a significant proportion of the population at the time, and left 70 percent of existing infrastructure destroyed, the nation had to come together in unity for survival and build their nation from "ground zero".²⁹ Among the main mechanisms that were integral to the transition of Timor-Leste's post-conflict transition towards peace was the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR), and the Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF), jointly established with Indonesia. These mechanisms greatly assisted in balancing the desire for justice to be met, and the need for peace amongst the people.

CAVR and the *Chega!* Report: Processing the Past

The CAVR was established in 2001 to uncover the truth regarding human rights violations committed before the declaration of independence in 2002. The CAVR, which was the first reconciliation commission created in Asia, played an important role in healing the trauma of the Timorese. It gave a voice to the victims and brought the atrocities committed against them to light. This facilitated community reconciliation to a great extent.

Mr Hugo Maria Fernandes, the current Director of the Centro Nacional *Chega!* (CNC) explained that the leaders of Timor-Leste did not manipulate the reconciliation process as a political tool. Rather, it was used as it should have been — a mechanism for truth-seeking. Mr Fernandes emphasised that "reconciliation is a process, not an objective. So because it's a process, it will take time for people to come to reveal the truth. And then accept it, and then repent and then pardon."³⁰ One of the significant outcomes of the CAVR was the publication of its findings in five volumes of the *Chega!* Report.

The *Chega!* Report remains one of the most comprehensive documentations of conflict in the late 20th century. The report is a testament to the commitment to documenting human rights violations and restoring the dignity to victims by highlighting their experiences in detail, effectively giving identity to the countless people who suffered under the former regime. Mr Fernandes explained that the report is structured into five main content areas: the historical context of colonialism and decolonisation; the history of the conflict; the operational structure of the Indonesian military and police; the patterns of human rights violations; and approximately 200 recommendations for the future.³¹ Ms Leonésia Tecla da Silva, a peace mediator involved in drafting Timor-Leste's National Action Plan, noted that civil society continues to use the *Chega!* report as a guiding framework: "We are following the *Chega!* recommendations, which I myself as a co-drafter, as a penholder for the second Generation of Timor-Leste's National Action Plan 2025."³²

The Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF): Diplomacy over Prosecution

While the CAVR focused primarily on the internal peace process among the Timorese, managing relations with Indonesia required a more complex and delicate approach. The UN established the Serious Crimes Unit (SCU) to pursue accountability for grave violations, while the CTF was jointly established in 2005 by Indonesia and Timor-Leste. The CTF was a binational body designed to establish a shared historical record of the violence surrounding the 1999 referendum. Mr Lisualdo Gaspar, the current Ambassador of Timor-Leste to Malaysia, shared with us regarding his experiences as someone who was involved in the process of nation-building, despite the depth of mistrust that existed at that time:

*"In 2004, during the second Joint Ministerial Commission on Bilateral Relations between Timor-Leste and Indonesia, held in Dili, I served as Secretariat of the Working Group on Judiciary Matters. Despite the agenda having been discussed and agreed upon in advance, the atmosphere between the two delegations was one of palpable animosity. Delegates would not so much as meet each other's eyes. The CTF process would prove instrumental in bridging that divide — not by resolving every grievance, but by establishing a foundation of mutual acknowledgement upon which a working bilateral relationship could be built. To pursue this path required genuine political courage from the leadership of both Timor-Leste and Indonesia. Faced with criticism internally and from the international community, both governments nonetheless chose the harder and less certain road to build a long-lasting bilateral relations."*³³

Mr Gaspar's testimony lends strong support to the difficult process of reconciling with the events in the past, which was very much fresh in the minds of the people. What may have helped repair the bilateral relations between Timor-Leste and Indonesia at the time is the acceptance of culpability. The CTF report in 2008 underscored the political significance of diplomatic language in this matter. Mr Fernandes noted:

*"The official statement made by [the former] Indonesian President was that they admitted the crimes committed and also regret for that. And Timor-Leste said that we admitted the violations committed by Timorese and regret and also apologised."*³⁴

This distinction between expressions of "regret" and "apology" was integral to the friendship aspect of the CTF. The Timorese leadership accepted "regret" as a strong enough basis to move forward. In addition, the conflict was widely accepted to be between the Timorese people and the Indonesian National Armed Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia referred to as TNI), rather than with Indonesian civilians. This allowed for a rapid normalisation of relations between the two nations, and secured harmony between the people.

Whilst many Timorese had hoped for formal indictments against those accused of the human rights violations, this could not be done through the CTF framework. Instead, other processes were established for this purpose, such as the SCU and subsequent trials conducted by the Special Panels for Serious Crimes (SPSC). An ad hoc Human Rights Court was also established, but the indictment process was challenging due to many reasons, among which was the difficulty in extraditing suspects of human rights violations.³⁵ Mr Fernandes echoed Professor Braithwaite's sentiments and explained the pragmatic aspect of the CTF, "Whatever the indictments, the trial would never happen... And in Timor-Leste, we don't have an extradition agreement with Indonesia..."³⁶

That said, securing justice to a nation that has been wronged is a necessary part of the peace process. But events throughout history have shown that revenge is often confused with justice. Here, the leadership of Timor-Leste rose above the base human desire for vengeance, and collectively decided that a restorative approach was more beneficial for the people than one that was strictly retributive in nature.

Moving Forward: Forgiving the Past for Peace and Prosperity

Despite the positive connotations embedded in the terms of "truth" and "friendship" within the CTF framework, the reconciliation process required immense personal fortitude from everyone involved, including the commissioners. This is because hardly anyone was spared from suffering losses during the period of violence, yet they had to sit across the table from the very same persons accused of perpetrating the violence. For example, Ms Felicidade de Sousa Guterres, who served as the only female commissioner on the CTF, recalled her initial hesitation when asked to join the commission by Prime Minister Gusmão, who was serving as the nation's first President at the time:

*"The first time when Mr Xanana called me, I told him this, 'I think it's very hard for me to carry out this duty if I meet again with the people who were supposed to kill us. And then, I feel trauma with the guns, the military, everything... I feel like I have to hide from this place. I suffered for a long time but then Mr Xanana said, 'You go, this is a State Mission'. I finally realised the importance of reconciliation between the two Nations Timor-Leste and Indonesia.'"*³⁷

She experienced great internal conflict in overcoming this trauma for the sake of the nation's future. There were times she questioned herself if she could participate in the CTF, as she found it personally difficult to do so. Yet, upon reflecting on the demands of the post-conflict environment, she recognised that reconciliation required a broader perspective. Beyond the shared border, Timor-Leste and Indonesia are also bound by a deep history and connection with their people that go beyond the period of conflict. For the long-term stability, and mutual benefit of both nations, Ms Felicidade Guterres found the strength and the will to move forward with a spirit of forgiveness.

From what we were able to observe, the Timorese leaders' pragmatic and culturally grounded approach towards justice and reconciliation set a powerful example that others were able to follow. Whilst it is neither possible nor realistic to heal all wounds, the pragmatic approach was essential to their social and spiritual healing. It also helped the nation to move on by prioritising regional stability and bilateral cooperation over

the pursuit of international tribunals. This facilitated the young nation's integration into the region, paving the way for its accession to ASEAN without jeopardising bilateral relations with its more established neighbour.

Despite all that had happened in the complex past of the two neighbours, both countries were able to move forward by prioritising cooperation and regional stability. In many ways, this process embodied principles of the "ASEAN Way" which emphasises dialogue and diplomacy well before Timor-Leste became a Member State on 26 October 2025. Some may dismiss avenues for dialogue and diplomacy as nothing but "talk shop", yet the enduring relationship between Timorese and Indonesians post-war is evidence that peace and unity can be established even between nations that were formerly the occupied and the occupier.

In many ways, the success of bringing together the people within the newly-independent nation of Timor-Leste and maintaining peace among themselves and with their neighbours after an armed conflict can be attributed to the example of the Timorese leadership. To say they did not suffer at the same level as ordinary citizens would be a grave error. On the contrary, they endured comparable hardships, yet remained steadfast in adopting a pragmatic approach suited to the realities of a small post-conflict country that still needed the support of its neighbours, especially in the initial stages of post-independence. This approach required immense political maturity from leaders like Prime Minister Gusmão and President Ramos-Horta, who prioritised the nation's survival over personal vendettas. The base desire for revenge needed to be checked and set aside to sustain peace, which is the prerequisite for the development of any nation. President Ramos-Horta explained it perfectly when he said,

*"Summon the courage to forgive, not to forget the past. No one is going to forget the past, but don't allow your suffering, your pain, your anger to dominate your life because if you do that, you remain hostage to your enemies. If you allow it to dominate your life, you are not [truly] living, but you are living with anger and hatred."*³⁸

We can clearly remember his expression as he reflected on the assassination attempt against him, and the murder of his beloved sister. Despite the personal tragedies he

endured, he bore no marks of a broken man. Instead, we were able to see just how important courage and forgiveness are to heal and move forward. This example set by the Timorese leadership, created an atmosphere of harmony between the Timorese and the Indonesian people. Ms Maria de Lurdes Martins de Sousa Bessa recounted her visits to West Timor (an Indonesian territory) where she experienced the spirit of family and shared identity rather than hostility:

*"When I go to Kupang... we speak our language, Tetum. And when we talk about Timor with those who have an Indonesian passport, they say that 'We are Timorese'. And we get together, we cook Timorese food. And, I mean, even being there, they are proud to be Timorese."*³⁹

In addition, we observed that the religious beliefs of the Timorese have been a fundamental factor underpinning the Timorese capacity for forgiveness. Emeritus Professor William Maley, an established expert on peacekeeping operations, shared in our interview with him that "religious values [of the Timorese] and social closeness reinforce reconciliation; younger Timorese maintain warm ties with Indonesians despite the history of occupation." Despite the extensive destruction of life and property that the Timorese faced in the period surrounding independence, they were never wanting in the strength of their character and magnanimity by forgiving those who had wronged them.⁴⁰

The Power of the Community Reconciliation Process (CRP) and *Nahe Biti*

The ability of the Timorese to forgive their former oppressors does not negate the need for justice to be met. However, several limitations within the formal justice system necessitated alternative approaches to seeking reparations. The CAVR recognised this and facilitated the Community Reconciliation Process (CRP) via traditional *lisan* (customary law) practices. For example, the practice of justice "on the mat" or *nabe biti* allowed for an honest, open, and healing dialogue between the victims, their families, and in some cases, the perpetrators. Unlike the adversarial nature of most modern court systems, *nabe biti* emphasises restoration over retribution; prioritising the repair of social relationships and the reintegration of the offender into the community rather than punitive measures alone.

Professor John Braithwaite, who has studied peacebuilding extensively in Timor-Leste through the "Peacebuilding Compared" project, highlights the efficacy and inclusivity of this model. In our interview with him, he emphasised the important role played by women leaders, who, alongside male traditional leaders, actively promoted forgiveness within the reconciliation process.⁴¹ He further noted that when the perpetrators openly admitted to the crimes they had committed and showed genuine remorse, it facilitated the process of forgiveness for the victims and their families. This greatly assisted the reintegration of these perpetrators back into their communities.⁴² Professor Braithwaite recalled a powerful moment that elucidates the transformative potential of *nabe biti* in which the vulnerability expressed through the perpetrator's confession led to a community embrace:

*"And then they all cried when he gave testimony. And then they said, 'He's the one that should be forgiven. And all of these others should not be forgiven'... The women came and hugged him, and the men hugged him. And they didn't react like that to the others. He was the one they respected and admired."*⁴³

This incident highlights that many Timorese find the act of public confessions to be cathartic, as it validates the harrowing experience of victims, as well as balances the social and spiritual needs of both the victim and the offender. In this regard, the formal court system is severely lacking. Dr Lia Kent, a scholar who has extensively researched transitional justice in Timor-Leste, notes, "I see that the grassroots process of peacebuilding has a really important role."⁴⁴ Drawing from our interviews, it is evident that genuine dialogue is one of the main factors that enabled the Timorese to escape the entrapment of a "victim mindset." Although independence was officially achieved in 2002, true freedom of the Timorese is found in their ability to let go of their painful past. Prime Minister Gusmão highlighted this in his 2017 speech:

"It was only in 2009 that we managed to close our chapter of suffering for good, under the motto of 'Goodbye conflict, welcome development,' by committing as a nation to beginning a new journey, one where we all put the national interests above any grievances and political convictions dividing us, so that the next generations might grow within an atmosphere of peace and trust. This had to include an intense process of dialogue and

*reconciliation, where forgiveness overcame hatred, and where tolerance overcame revenge. Thus, we were freed from painful memories and corrosive feelings. This was indeed the true liberation of the Timorese people."*⁴⁵

From Justice to Reparation: Shifting the Focus to Victims

In the first two decades after independence, there was an overwhelming demand for the pursuit of criminal justice. However, the challenges associated with bringing formal charges and securing convictions brought the realisation that a more pragmatic approach would be more beneficial. Mr Fernandes observed that the strategic shift was made to focus on providing reparations for victims instead. The reparations specifically for the victims became the focus of the Timor-Leste Government, and recent developments have extended beyond recognition of veterans' sacrifice alone.

Ms Lopes, a human rights lawyer and former commissioner, highlighted the disparity in recognition between veterans and victims, noting that many civilians had supported the resistance through logistical assistance and intelligence gathering.⁴⁶ This included women who suffered grave sexual violence, yet their sacrifices sometimes went unrecognised. This imbalance is currently being addressed by the Timor-Leste Government through many initiatives, including the provision of allowing victims a safe platform to speak up about the atrocities committed against them. Mr Fernandes explained that the public testimony process restores dignity of the victims, with many expressing relief after telling their stories. He recounted the case of a female victim who after testifying said, "Now I can die... I gained back my dignity."⁴⁷ Mr Fernandes also shared that the recent initiative by President Ramos-Horta of awarding certificates to victims has also provided much needed validation.⁴⁸ Although symbolic in nature, this form of reparation is highly significant in restoring dignity to the victims. It changes their former status of passive sufferers to acknowledged and meaningful participants in Timor-Leste's history.

From our research, we came to the realisation that the process of achieving peace in Timor-Leste demonstrates that justice is not a linear destination that can only be reached through a courthouse door. In Prime Minister Gusmão's 2017

speech at the UN Headquarters in New York, he reiterated the importance of their national mechanisms in helping the Timorese achieve peace, which required "national leadership and ownership of decisions, programs, and mechanisms, supported by flexible and efficient international intervention". His statement highlights the reality of the justice system, which is a multifaceted process that is strengthened by the integration of formal state mechanisms with cultural practices.

In this regard, the "justice on the mat" approach was successful in ways that the formal legal system failed, as it resonated more closely with the Timorese worldview. The shift from demanding criminal justice to advancing holistic reparations represents a significant and positive development within the victim's rights movement. The Timor-Leste Government's institutional and financial support for these alternative methods to restore justice for the victims is a welcome development and indicative of a more inclusive peace process. Through institutions like the Centro Nacional Chega!, Timor-Leste continues to preserve and institutionalise the memories of victims, ensuring that a culture of forgiveness is not equated to a culture of forgetting past injustices. Rather, it underscores that there is more than one way to ensure justice is served for the restoration of the victims' dignity and the healing of their families.



The Timorese community organised a traditional ceremony called *Nahe Biti-Bo'ot* and *Tara Bandu* in Bobonaro.

Credit: Media team of the Ministry of Justice, Timor-Leste.



Ms Felicidade Guterres is pictured being sworn in as a Commissioner for the Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF) between Timor-Leste and Indonesia by the President of Timor-Leste at the time, Xanana Gusmão, and the former President of Indonesia in Bali, circa 2005.

Credit: Ms Felicidade Guterres' personal collection.



Credit: fotoBERNAMA COPYRIGHT RESERVED

“ Our relationship with Indonesia goes beyond history: we share cultural, linguistic, and familial bonds that strengthen full integration into ASEAN. We are fraternal brothers, development partners, committed to building a peaceful, prosperous, and supportive region. Twenty-five years later, Timor-Leste remains a robust democracy, built upon the pillars of dialogue, mutual respect, and inclusivity. ”

**The President of Timor-Leste,
H.E. Dr José Ramos-Horta**

during his speech at the Closing Session of the
9th World Peace Forum on 11 November 2020.⁴⁹

PART II

Building the Nation from the Ground Up







An aerial view of Cristo Rei in Dili.

Credit: UN photo, photographer Martine Perret.

Chapter 3:

Leadership and Democracy

The trajectory of self-governance and democracy in Timor-Leste is unique within Southeast Asia. It is a nation that was established through the strategic and collaborative efforts of multiple fronts: armed freedom fighters in the jungle mountains, the clandestine networks embedded within the towns and villages, as well as the network of advocates that successfully pushed for change at the international level. That said, Timor-Leste continues to face significant challenges as it seeks to fully recover from years of occupation and the violence that occurred during that time. If peace and unity cannot be sustained amongst the people, then achieving meaningful progress in the political, economic, and social spheres becomes a distant dream.

The Legitimacy of Historical Leaders

In Timor-Leste, political authority is closely intertwined with the historical contribution of its leaders, leaving a lasting impression on the national psyche of its citizens. Leaders who are greatly respected – as indicated by the support shown in the polls – are usually those that were involved in, or their lineage can be traced back to, the struggle for liberation.⁵⁰ These remarkable, charismatic individuals are well-loved by their people because their dedication to their country is undisputed through records of their involvement in the resistance through the armed, clandestine, or diplomatic fronts.

Findings from our interviews further suggest that a significant factor which contributed to the stability of Timor-Leste at its nascent stage and subsequent development was the emergence of “Generation ‘75”, referring to the leadership from the three fronts. Figures such as Prime Minister Gusmão and President Ramos-Horta are not merely politicians; they are viewed as the “founding fathers” of the nation. As Novak (2023) explains, “Collectively, these five men define the ‘Generation ‘75’ in the eyes of the Timorese people, who place their faith in them and, by extension, the institutions they lead, to steward the nation.”⁵¹

More importantly, they were not leaders who simply made demands from their people or expected them to be at the frontlines of the struggle for independence. Rather, they were the main figures who were actively involved in the resistance and experienced personal loss and suffering, alongside the broader Timorese population. They were one with their people. The personal accounts of Timorese leaders reveal the depth of their sacrifices. Their willingness to risk their lives and be separated from their families for the sake of the nation provides a form of legitimacy that is difficult to challenge in a democratic contest. In our interview with President Ramos-Horta, he shared that Prime Minister Gusmão's political popularity may be attributed to this.⁵² He explained that the nation is well aware of Prime Minister Gusmão's unwavering commitment to the resistance and the immense personal suffering he endured. He was a leader who walked the talk, and the strength of his reputation continues to carry significant political weight. Specifically, President Ramos-Horta shared that,

*"He [Prime Minister Gusmão] was 17 years old when he was leading the fight in the jungle mountains, he spent 8 years in prison. He had enormous political and moral authority. When he told the people, 'we must move on, do not hate, do not seek revenge..' people listen."*⁵³

As the world continues to bear witness to violence between countries, the leaders of Timor-Leste have managed to set a fine example of forgiveness and reconciliation, both internally and in their relations with others. For example, Prime Minister Gusmão did what many of us may find difficult to do by advocating for forgiveness even towards those who had collaborated with the previous regime. In the documentary film, *A Hero's Journey* by director Phan (2006), Prime Minister Gusmão articulated the importance of this principle:

*"Forgiveness, to me, means peace of mind. If we can forgive, we liberate ourselves from all bad sentiments... of revenge... of self-flagellation. If we forgive, we stop a part of our life. We say no – now I am entering a new phase of my life. If not, I live everyday [with] the sense that I am the worst victim in the world, and we are everyday trying to understand why... and we don't live in peace. We are always trying to be selfish – 'Me... me... why not him, or them?' When we don't forgive, we don't free ourselves from thinking only [about] ourselves. Forgiveness is the way to live in peace. Peace not with other people but firstly, with him or herself."*⁵⁴

Although past injustices were acknowledged, Prime Minister Gusmão chose to focus on restorative justice as opposed to divisive political factions. This principled stance enabled the Timorese leaders to establish a foundation for a shared national identity in a fragile, post-conflict environment.

We observed that this approach was effective because Timorese leaders do not dictate from the safety of their palace walls and official residences. They have lived through the impacts of violence. President Ramos-Horta himself survived an assassination attempt in 2008. The shared experience of hardship during the resistance created a strong bond between the leaders and their people, which facilitated reconciliation. History bears witness to the wrongdoings committed during the occupation, yet President Ramos-Horta has nonetheless acknowledged that the then Indonesian President, B.J. Habibie, accepted and honoured the outcome of the referendum. He further emphasised that Indonesia played an integral role in supporting peace post-independence:

"Indonesia could have said, 'Good, you are independent now, enjoy your independence.' Then they wouldn't need to do anything. They could just turn their back and ignore us. But no, they shook hands and contributed to making our borders peaceful and preventing militia gangs from destabilising Timor-Leste. They didn't go around and block a Timor-Leste regional relationship."

In our interview with Professor Braithwaite, he reflected on the remarkable relationship between the Timorese and Indonesians post-occupation:

*"Both sides were just outstanding in the way they were interacting with each other. It was great leadership from the top. And then people like Xanana Gusmão and Ramos-Horta in particular were so respected, and some other leaders as well, that they were able to persuade the traditional leaders. And then the traditional leaders were working hard to persuade the people to be forgiving."*⁵⁵

Mr Fernandes shared the view that the Timorese experience of conflict is collective in nature. In reflecting on relations with Indonesia, Mr Fernandes explained that there is no hatred because the "Timorese and Indonesians suffered the same violations under

one regime... So in that understanding, there is no hate among the Timorese towards the Indonesians."⁵⁶

This shared understanding of the conflict helped establish a level of trust amongst the people, which in turn generated support for the resistance's operations. By bridging internal divisions, this cohesion allowed the movement to remain functional and effective, despite considerable logistical and geographical constraints.

The Complementary Roles of Timor-Leste's Resistance Leaders

The success of the Timorese resistance and the subsequent stability of its democracy relied on the strategic division of labour, with each front having distinct roles and responsibilities. Although leaders were often separated by vast distances and were unable to communicate directly, their actions complemented each other to achieve their intended objective. This required a high level of trust, as they had to coordinate with one another despite being unable to assess the situation in different environments for themselves.

In our interview with Professor Braithwaite, he recounted the conversation he had with President Ramos-Horta when he asked him what were the moments he was most proud of during his fight against the occupation.⁵⁷ The President recalled a moment in New York, where he was lobbying for Timor-Leste's right to self-determination, when he received a call from a distraught military commander back home. The commander, overwhelmed by the sight of his soldiers' families being targeted, was on the verge of permitting his men to leave their cantonments.

Despite the resistance leader's genuine anguish, President Ramos-Horta responded with uncompromising discipline, as he knew that if the armed fighters left their cantonments to fight, it would result in further loss of life, and constitute a significant setback to their struggle for independence. He instructed the commander to act with the resolve required of a national leader, insisting that the troops remain in their stations, even if it meant leaving their families to face the impending violence without their protection.

President Ramos-Horta's strategy was centred on the long-term survival of the nation. He reasoned that any retaliatory breakout by the military would play directly into the hands of their enemies, and may adversely affect the country's future and the safety of subsequent generations. By maintaining military discipline and placing trust in the anticipated arrival of international forces, the strategy successfully denied the opposition the opportunity to frame the conflict as a "civil war".

This move also ensured that the international community remained focused on the external aggression, ultimately preserving the legitimacy of the independence movement. In our interview with Emeritus Professor Maley, he shared his reflections on the efficacy of President Ramos-Horta's leadership at the international level, stating that, "He had an acute understanding of the dynamics of international relations. And it always struck me, he knows exactly what message he wants to get out."⁵⁸

However, President Ramos-Horta's decisive action would not bear fruit if the military commander did not place trust in his diplomatic judgment. Both leaders demonstrated the wisdom, restraint, and discipline needed to act in the best interest of a nation during a most challenging and conflicting time, instead of giving in to the personal desire of protecting their own families.

The revered status of leaders who were active during the resistance does not mean they are complacent in the current political landscape. Ms Lopes gave her opinion on how this historical legitimacy manifests in the current political environment. She observed that the people distinguish between leaders based on their specific historical roles and current focus:

"He [President Ramos-Horta] has been the country's leader in terms of the diplomatic front, from the beginning of independence. That was his role in ensuring that the country's interest is advocated at the diplomatic level... The people at the grassroots are still very dependent on their original leader."⁵⁹

Ms Lopes further highlighted the specific appeal of these leaders, noting that "Xanana actually, he's more leaning to children and young people, whereas President Ramos-Horta is more leaning into the leadership, younger leadership..."⁶⁰ This

indicates that these leaders occupy distinct but complementary areas of focus within the current democratic framework.

Humility, Inclusivity, and Resilience

We conducted interviews with politicians, leaders, practitioners, academics, and ordinary citizens from Timor-Leste, Malaysia and Australia – all of whom provided us with diverse viewpoints on Timor-Leste's post-independence journey. Notably, the consistent theme that emerged from across the interviews is the positive perception of the current Timorese leadership by all of our interviewees, which speaks volumes about the strength of their leadership.

The leadership style of President Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Gusmão may be best described as one that embodies humility and inclusivity – qualities which helped to win the hearts of the Timorese and unify a country in transition after independence. President Ramos-Horta, in particular, has consistently maintained a leadership style which focuses on community engagement, emphasising that leaders and civil servants should be accountable to the people they serve.⁶¹ This is reflected from the early period of his leadership until his current presidency. Today, he continues to make the presidential palace more accessible and welcoming to the public, reducing both the symbolic and physical barriers between the State and its citizens. He highlighted the importance of this approach when he said,

*"My Presidency is an open one, with no iron gates and no armed security. It is accessible to everyone, particularly children, who have unrestricted access to the Presidential grounds with a special swimming pool for children, and an after school learning centre."*⁶²

Ms Idelta Maria Rodrigues, the current Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste to New Zealand reflected on the strong bond the President has with the community:

*"You can see our national hero, like our current President. So he can drive his [own] car, he can easily communicate with the people, you know, so anybody can come to talk with him. So it's not like people are afraid of their leaders but the community feels confident with their leaders."*⁶³

We were privileged to have seen the President's inclusive leadership style in action. During our visit to Dili, we observed that the Presidential Palace was always open to any Timorese who wished to enter. Within the grounds are facilities such as a children's educational centre, as well as a swimming pool and mini zoo. Children would not feel shy to enter the palace grounds despite being barefoot; they knew they were welcome to benefit from the facilities the Palace offered. It is not common for a presidential palace to be so open, particularly in allowing women and children to enter freely as they are. This is a testament to the President's humility and unwavering commitment to his people, so much so that adherence to "protocols" do not apply when it comes to the needy and deserving.

Although both President Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Gusmão have unique leadership styles, the fundamental principles that guide them are similar. For example, Prime Minister Gusmão is well known and loved by his people due to this ability to maintain a personal connection with the average Timorese citizen. The term of endearment attributed to him is Avô Nana (Grandpa Xanana) due to his accessible and approachable leadership style.⁶⁴

Prime Minister Gusmão also adopts an inclusive approach to governance which is demonstrated during the drafting of the *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030*.⁶⁵ During this time, Prime Minister Gusmão travelled to every one of Timor-Leste's 65 sub-districts to hold open dialogues with local communities.⁶⁶ His consistent practice of engaging directly with all Timorese across diverse socio-economic backgrounds has contributed to Prime Minister Gusmão's relevance as a central, unifying figure who is viewed as a peer by the common citizen rather than a distant elite.⁶⁷ His ability to bridge the generational gap between the veterans and the younger generation, as well as to connect the urban and the rural population, has fostered a true sense of national unity beyond the corridors of power. The current democracy of Timor-Leste is further strengthened by the positive impact of its leaders, as they share lived experiences of the resistance that are relatable to the people. This has created a strong sense of social cohesion, alongside a culture of forgiveness and reconciliation, all of which shaped the resilience of the Timorese.



Succession and the Next Generation of Leadership

Whilst the charismatic leaders of “Generation ‘75” have been instrumental in establishing peace and driving development in Timor-Leste, the long-term sustainability of these achievements is also dependent on a smooth leadership transition that is inclusive of the younger generation. However, the inevitable shift from the founding generation of leaders to a new leadership may present challenges, as the credibility of the younger generation may be questioned due to the perception that they were not part of the revolution which brought about freedom and democracy to Timor-Leste.⁶⁸ With approximately 75 percent of the Timorese population under the age of 35, there is a clear demographic need for wider political inclusion, as many young people seek better representation and wider economic opportunities.⁶⁹ In this regard, our interviewees highlighted that the support of partners like Malaysia and Australia has been very helpful to Timor-Leste’s human capital development and institutional improvement. Collectively, this would ensure that the legacy of the resistance will organically move towards a sustainable, inclusive, and forward-looking democracy.



Prime Minister Gusmão, lovingly referred to as *Avo Nana*, interacting with the local community.

Credit: Media team of the Prime Minister's office, Dili.



President Ramos-Horta handed over a house, kiosk, and a pig pen constructed by the office of the President to a Timorese widow through its programme, The Civil Society and Social Support Service (SSAS-PR) in Laclubar, Manatuto.

Credit: Media team of the President's Palace, Dili.



Young boys from Dili enjoying a casual afternoon by observing the birds housed in the mini zoo on the grounds of the Presidential Palace.

Credit: Author's own.

Chapter 4: Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Boosting Economic Trajectory

Timor-Leste's subsequent rise from conflict was no easy feat. When UNTAET handed over sovereignty to the first constitutional government of Timor-Leste, it marked the end of Timor-Leste's survival phase. The restoration of independence heralded the beginning of a more intricate struggle for institutional maturity. At the outset, Timor-Leste faced a pronounced deficit in human capital, severe infrastructure constraints, and a scarcity of trained civil servants. Compounding these challenges, Timor-Leste had inherited a post-colonial legal system that needed to be balanced with the integration of modern statehood and indigenous knowledge.⁷⁰ Ms Felicidade de Sousa Guterres aptly described the initial stages of Timor-Leste's self-governance as "...starting from the dust."⁷¹ While the early years following independence were defined by the urgent need to establish basic sovereignty, the nation's current trajectory is shaped by the need to professionalise those very foundations. The transition from post-conflict recovery to sustainable statehood necessitates a shift from survival-oriented governance to institutional professionalisation. Before that can be achieved, the early challenges of building Timor-Leste from the ground up had to be identified and eventually overcome.

The Human Capital Deficit and Linguistic Barriers

One of the most crucial aspects of nation-building is having adequate human capital, which Timor-Leste suffered a deficit from in the early years following independence. This is because during the occupation, Timorese were not included in most of the technical and upper-management roles. This presented a formidable challenge for Timor-Leste when it was in its formative stage of development. Ms Idelta Rodrigues highlighted that:

*"We can't build the country without expertise. Because everything you do without preparing your people, you can't develop. So that is why investing in the human resources, particularly in education, is one of the main achievements, that we have seen since our independence."*⁷²

In addition to the lack of technical expertise, there was also a significant cultural and linguistic barrier. This may be attributed to the country's linguistic diversity. Whilst Portuguese and Tetum serve as the official languages, Indonesian remains widely spoken. In addition, English has become an important language to master, due to its role in expanding education and employment opportunities for the Timorese population. When citizens from different socio-economic backgrounds speak different languages without a high level of proficiency in a common language, it can contribute to the disconnect between the different generations. Mr Ariff Abdullah Sagan, the former president of the Timor-Leste Islamic Community highlighted the resulting friction between the older generation who spoke Portuguese and the younger generation who preferred to speak Tetum and Indonesian, or were even more inclined towards English. The linguistic stratification has resulted in a development gap which was more acutely observed in the rural areas beyond Dili.⁷³

The resilience of the Timorese is reflected in their ability to address early challenges – from the deficits in human capital to managing the needs of a modern civil service – reflecting the unique nature of Timorese resilience. However, as the following sections illustrate, the issue persists in the form of administrative resets and the inevitable administrative instability that follows. Unlike the early years of independence, the current primary constraints centre on ensuring policy consistency, which is important to attract long-term investment. To effectively boost its economic trajectory, Timor-Leste must now pivot from the initial revolutionary spirit of nation-building towards institutional stability, which will inevitably encourage long-term economic prosperity.

Changes in Public Service and Administrative Instability

The stability of governance is very much dependent on the development of an efficient and professional civil service which operates independently of political transitions. Timor-Leste is currently having to navigate certain complexities in this regard, as changes in administration often result in a change of the civil servants tasked to execute the vision of any administration. This becomes a limitation to technical continuity and the establishment of institutional memory. As such, building long-term institutional capacity presents a critical avenue for reform in support of sustained stability in governance.

One of our interviewees suggested a recurring “reset” phenomenon, where new administrations may seek to restructure the civil service to ensure alignment with their specific policy goals.⁷⁴ While we understand the desire for a fresh start, the practice can inadvertently impact the retention of institutional knowledge and technical expertise due to constant changes in the civil servants who are responsible for executing policies from the government of the day. This is particularly significant in an emerging economy, where skilled human capital remains a scarce and valuable resource. The *Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030* (SDP) acknowledges these realities and highlights that the civil service requires a sustained, long-term reform to improve educational qualifications across the bureaucracy, which will also help to address existing skills gaps.⁷⁵

Policy Inconsistency and Economic Uncertainty

Closely linked to the turnover of civil servants is the challenge of maintaining consistency in policies. Sustainable development requires the consistent execution of long-term strategies that benefit the people, regardless of changes in political administration. It is very common around the world that changes in administrations may result in a re-evaluation of policies. The Government of Timor-Leste should be commended for articulating a clear long-term vision through the *Strategic Development Plan*, but the concern remains that the implementation may be affected by short-term administrative shifts.⁷⁶

The Timorese economy may also benefit from the Government’s consistent policy implementations, as this is the main aspect that drives foreign and private sector investment. Investors generally seek predictability, and the tendency towards administrative “resets” can create an environment of uncertainty regarding legal protections and taxation policies. Strengthening the capacity of government agencies to implement and continue policies as planned – regardless of changes in administration – is therefore essential for achieving the country’s economic and development goals.

The Infrastructure Gap: Connectivity and Basic Services

The aftermath of the violence that Timor-Leste experienced during her early stages required substantial reconstruction efforts such as building of roads, bridges, water, and sanitation systems, as well as electricity grids to allow for basic economic activities. Much of the subsequent infrastructure development has been focused in Dili, the capital, which in turn benefits those residing in the city. Nevertheless, the *Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030* highlighted that the poor condition of roads continues to be a major constraint on rural development.⁷⁷

Ms Lopes described the reality of the infrastructure deficit during her 2025 trip to Suai, a small coastal town located about 138 kilometres from Dili. She recounted meeting villagers who had to manually pull trucks across a collapsed bridge to access markets:

*"The roads were cut off because of the climate change. The flooding had destroyed the bridge and so what happened was, all the cars had to be pulled manually by another truck. [...] I talked with one old man that was there... he literally told me that... 'We just need roads. We don't need anything else. We just need good roads, bringing our goods to sell them and then move on with our life.'"*⁷⁸

In addition, Timor-Leste had suffered from limited air connectivity for many years. In the past, available flights were expensive and few in between. This had a direct impact on the economy, as it was an obstacle to attracting foreign investment and expanding potential tourism markets.

Recognising the impact of these challenges on mobility and the adverse effects on all aspects of daily life, the Timor-Leste Government is working diligently to improve the overall infrastructure of the nation, including roads, ports, and airports which are all essential for a thriving economy.⁷⁹ A case in point is the expansion of the Presidente Nicolau Lobato International Airport in Dili to address the concern of connectivity. This was a major project financially supported through collaborative efforts between the Australian Government, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Finance Corporation, and the Japan International Cooperation Agency,

in partnership with Timor-Leste to improve facilities at the terminals, extend the runway, accommodate bigger aeroplanes, and comfortably provide services to more passengers.⁸⁰ This redevelopment initiative represents a significant step in efforts to facilitate Timor-Leste's economic recovery and diversification, as well as to increase its resilience.⁸¹

With Timor-Leste successfully joining ASEAN, the latest infrastructure developments are indeed welcome, as they enhance the nation's air transportation system, which is one of the requirements for ASEAN accession. According to Criterion 7 Item B of the *Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full Membership* (hereinafter referred to as the *Roadmap*), a hosting Member State must demonstrate logistical readiness and possess appropriate physical infrastructure to host the many ASEAN meetings that would take place. This includes a modern airport that is capable of accommodating the arrival of world leaders and official delegations, including the capacity to manage the complex security, immigration and customs procedures, as well as the parking and handling of private and state aircraft during high-level ASEAN meetings.⁸²

Closely aligned with the fulfilment of Criterion 7 Item B regarding air connectivity is the launch of the inaugural Batik Air flight from Kuala Lumpur to Dili in June 2025 as a result of the Air Services Agreement signed between Timor-Leste and Malaysia. The operation of the Batik Air flights will also encourage the arrival of tourists and further strengthen the ties between Timorese and Malaysians.⁸³

In our interview with Ms Milena Maria da Costa Rangel, Timor-Leste's Vice-Minister for ASEAN Affairs (2025), she highlighted the immediate positive impact of this new route, noting that initial concerns of low passenger numbers had proven to be unfounded:

"I was told by the ambassador, that initially, when we launched the Batik Air flight to Timor-Leste, direct flight, which is very, very helpful. I was a bit worried whether the number of passengers will continue to increase, or maybe all of a sudden decrease. But actually, the case is very positive. . . The percentage of people going to Timor-Leste and Timor-Leste coming to Malaysia has remained in very, very good numbers."

The introduction of direct flights between Kuala Lumpur and Dili has significantly boosted tourism, with many Malaysians now encouraged to visit Timor-Leste for the first time. For many Timorese, Malaysia is a top destination for their work arrangements, as well as for their medical needs. Aero Dili also has routes to Singapore and potentially Melbourne.⁸⁴ These developments have helped to jump-start Timor-Leste's tourism sector, which may one day compete with other popular tourist regional destinations like Bali, Krabi, and Phuket.

Developing Economic Infrastructure: The Greater Sunrise Project, Tibar and Suai Ports

Although the recent developments in air connectivity have been necessary and have resulted in a boost of travellers to and from Dili, Timor-Leste's current economic vulnerability due to the nation's reliance on revenues from the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves remains a pressing concern. Novak (2023) warns of the potential "fiscal cliff" within the next decade if the Greater Sunrise gas field is not developed or if the economy of Timor-Leste is not diversified.⁸⁵ These challenges can be traced back to Timor-Leste's history of occupation, which delayed economic development and created economic implications that are still felt today – but are progressively being addressed.

The Greater Sunrise gas field is a huge, undeveloped gas field located in the Timor sea between Australia and Timor-Leste. The development of the Greater Sunrise project represents a major opportunity for Timor-Leste's fiscal stability. While it holds the potential to provide the significant revenue necessary to fund national development, its successful management is key to providing the capital required for long-term economic strengthening. The Greater Sunrise's development necessitates Australia and Timor-Leste to work closely together and ensure adherence to the Maritime Boundary Treaty, which is why bilateral engagements have been accelerated to facilitate negotiations.⁸⁶ Whilst it is not suggested the Greater Sunrise project in itself can change the economic trajectory of Timor-Leste, its effective implementation could significantly boost the position of Timor-Leste from an emerging economy to a more advanced one, while improving the lives of its people.

Meanwhile, the Suai Port is intended to provide a logistics platform for the oil and gas sector, serving as an entry point for materials and equipment needed to build refinery and petrochemical infrastructure.⁸⁷ This is intended to support the oil and gas exploration and production in Timor-Leste's south coast petroleum corridor.⁸⁸

In addition, the construction of the Tibar Bay Port highlights the Government's commitment in developing Timor-Leste's infrastructure, enhancing trade, and increasing regional connectivity. The modern Tibar Bay was developed to replace the Dili Port, which was lacking in efficiency due to the congestion caused by its limited infrastructure. Tibar Bay would be able to address problems of the Dili Port, as the facilities can accommodate modern container ships better, which would decrease the transit times and drive down costs.⁸⁹

Timor-Leste's journey towards sustainable development is fundamentally anchored in its ability to strengthen institutional resilience and enhance physical connectivity. While the "reset" phenomenon within the civil service presents a tangible hurdle to technical continuity, the *Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030* provides a clear and structured roadmap for bridging these capacity gaps. The strategic expansion of key air and maritime hubs — most notably the milestone direct connection between Kuala Lumpur and Dili as well as the development of Tibar Bay Port — represents a decisive move to overcome both geographical and economic distance. These infrastructure milestones are expected to yield significant economic spillover effects, stimulate tourism, diversify trade, and provide the logistics framework necessary for the success of proposed oil and gas-related development projects. Although the Greater Sunrise project holds immense economic potential for Timor-Leste, it is equally important that its development, which is still being negotiated, will be done in satisfaction of the Maritime Boundary Treaty and for the sustainable long-term benefits for its people.⁹⁰ Ultimately, by prioritising policy consistency and aligning regional infrastructure, Timor-Leste will be well-positioned to transition into a competitive and integrated participant within the ASEAN and global economic frameworks.



United Nations peacekeepers assist with roadwork on a highway in Hera, underscoring the critical role of infrastructure development in the early post-independence years of Timor-Leste.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Eskider Debebe.



President Ramos-Horta provides support to the SSPS Congregation and advocates for the protection of women and children in Covalima as part of the Government's mission of supporting women and children who have experienced violence, harassment, and social challenges.

Credit: Media team of the President's Palace, Dili.



President Xanana is pictured interacting with a fellow Timorese. His humility and down-to-earth approach helps in bridging the gap between a leader and his people.

Credit: Media team of Prime Minister's Office, Dili.



The author with children who attend a school run by the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres (SPC) in Turiscaí, Timor-Leste, a rather remote location in a mountainous area approximately 87.5 km south of Dili. The SPC is important to the community due to their active involvement in education and grassroots support.

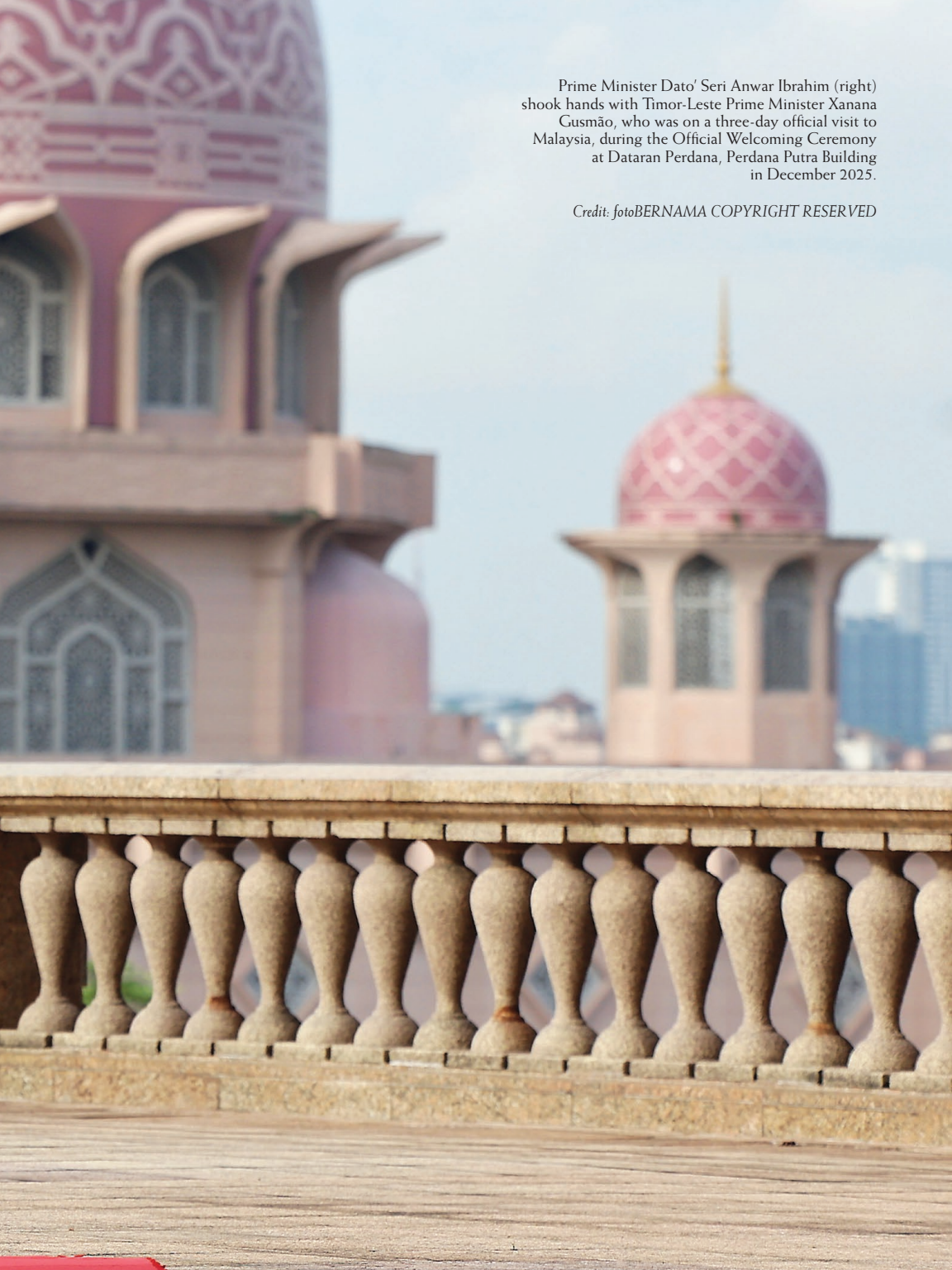
Credit: Media team of the President's Palace, Dili.

PART III

Malaysia's Role *Commitment to Regional Inclusivity*







Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim (right) shook hands with Timor-Leste Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, who was on a three-day official visit to Malaysia, during the Official Welcoming Ceremony at Dataran Perdana, Perdana Putra Building in December 2025.

Credit: fotoBERNAMA COPYRIGHT RESERVED

Chapter 5: Consistent Support

The bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Timor-Leste is unique and enduring, one that is not centred on geographical proximity alone. In all our interviews conducted, one central tenet that consistently emerged in describing Malaysia's role in facilitating Timor-Leste's development is our commitment to regional inclusivity. Whilst the principle of Prosper Thy Neighbour⁹¹ may have guided our bilateral relationship with Timor-Leste in the beginning, it is now more substantially driven by the spirit of inclusivity. Malaysia's consistent advocacy for Timor-Leste's interests – which emphasised advocacy for the right to independence in the early stages – later focused on development support and subsequent integration into ASEAN. One of the motivating factors to support the development of Timor-Leste is based on shared regional kinship. When one country achieves stability and prosperity, this would further strengthen regional peace, which is the foundation for economic growth and sustainable development. In our interview with our Foreign Minister, Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan, he elaborated that:

*"Supporting Timor-Leste's integration into ASEAN through sustained capacity-building, institutional strengthening and gradual economic and political integration therefore represents both a principled commitment and a strategic investment in a more stable, united and prosperous region."*⁹²

In essence, Malaysia's drive to foster an inclusive regional family steers its strong support for Timor-Leste, which ranges from early diplomatic recognition to long-term institutional capacity building, and commitment to regional integration and the security that follows.

Historical Apprehension

However, the establishment of Malaysia and Timor-Leste's bilateral relations was not without its challenges during the formative years. Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, who was

our Foreign Minister from 1999 to 2008, shared that the Timorese leadership initially had some apprehension regarding Malaysia's perceived stance on the occupation and subsequent restoration of Timor-Leste's independence. These concerns stemmed largely from our close relationship with Indonesia, which contributed to the perception that Malaysia may not genuinely support Timor-Leste's sovereignty.⁹³ To address this misperception, Malaysia did what we do best: engage in sincere and proactive diplomacy.

From Suspicion to Brotherly Trust: A Diplomatic Success Story

Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar was our Foreign Minister during Timor-Leste's transition from occupation to self-governance. He played an instrumental role in shifting Timorese perceptions from suspicion to solidarity. Malaysia's engagement with leaders of the resistance, even prior to Timor-Leste's restoration of independence in 2002, helped build a foundation of trust between our two countries. Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar explained the reason behind the strategy of inviting key Timorese figures, including Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo and Prime Minister Gusmão, to Kuala Lumpur was to foster mutual understanding and goodwill. He observed the subsequent change in their perception of Malaysia:

*"When they came... they spoke to me. They were actually surprised or shocked to see how open and friendly we were towards them and [supportive of] their desire to be an independent, sovereign state. So from a situation of suspicion, it become a brotherly feeling that Malaysia is a country that they can rely on."*⁹⁴

There are many lessons one can draw from our early relations with Timor-Leste, one of them being that a nation's genuine and consistent actions yield meaningful results over time. Despite initial reservations the Timorese leaders may have had regarding our position on their fight for self-determination, our leaders managed to put their minds at ease. Our sincerity to support Timor-Leste eventually proved that we were never acting as a proxy for other nations, but rather a sincere partner. Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar emphasised that the philosophy of Prosper Thy Neighbour was deeply rooted in Malaysia's foreign policy outlook, which drove our nation to offer assistance based on the desire to see Timor-Leste develop, rather than for strategic leverage. He mentioned,

*"[Our] relationships between states are also based on sincerity... Even though the playing field is not level, you try your best to make it level so that others can stand with you... And we think that if Timor-Leste is able to be prosperous, it can contribute to the well-being of ASEAN... We can work together with them, regionally and internationally."*⁹⁵

Based on the interviews we conducted, we came to realise that the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Timor-Leste is characterised by the Timorese leaders and average citizens alike as one grounded in sincerity. President Ramos-Horta expressed his opinion regarding Malaysia's assistance for and relationship with Timor-Leste, "A profound appreciation to Malaysia since day one of independence... And whoever was there all these years as Prime Minister of different [governments], they were all very supportive of Timor-Leste."⁹⁶

It is apparent that Malaysia's support for Timor-Leste throughout the years, despite changes in leadership, has always been consistent. This consistency in action is what managed to dissolve former suspicions and establish a foundation of trust between our nations, which was much needed in overcoming challenges that came with developing a newly-independent country.

From Liaison Office to Embassy

Malaysia was among the earliest countries to establish a physical diplomatic presence in Dili. Dato' Dr Rameez Yahaya, the current Director of the Centre for Leadership, Negotiations and Public Diplomacy at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia was entrusted with the responsibility of establishing our first liaison office in Timor-Leste. On 13 April 2001, more than a year before Timor-Leste's formal independence, the liaison office was set up at a room onboard the floating Central Maritime Hotel near the port before moving to a new location in the centre of Dili.⁹⁷ As he was heading the liaison office during that crucial period, Dato' Dr Rameez was able to provide insight as to why this unique location was chosen. Because of the war, the buildings on land were unstable; many were destroyed or rendered unsafe. Dili did not have enough

facilities that could be used for a liaison office, hence the floating hotel was the most suitable option available at the time.⁹⁸ He further explained that the floating hotel was considered to be safe, as there was also the presence of American military on board.

The establishment of the liaison office represents a significant milestone as it was the hard-earned result of Malaysia's advocacy for Timor-Leste at the international level. Dato' Dr Rameez recalled that Tan Sri Hasmy Agam, who was Malaysia's Permanent Representative to the UN at the time, "was pushing for our diplomatic mission and other foreign missions to be established in Timor-Leste before independence so that we could provide necessary assistance, aid, and facilities". Despite the prevailing political and security uncertainties at the time, Malaysia actualised the decision to have a physical liaison office in Dili even before the nation's independence, which showed that we were forward-thinking and proactive in its support. Here, the adage, "actions speak louder than words" comes to mind, as establishing Malaysia's liaison office exemplified Malaysia's confidence in Timor-Leste's newly established administration.

The liaison office not only provided a direct platform of communication between the Malaysian Government and the new leadership of Timor-Leste, but also helped to establish stronger, people-to-people relations with the Timorese. Dato' Dr Rameez highlighted that some of the priorities of Malaysia's early diplomatic mission in Dili were to lend assistance to the governance and security framework, to facilitate the establishment of a diplomatic structure, and to strengthen the technical capacity of its civil service. Upon the restoration of Timor-Leste's independence on 20 May 2002, Malaysia upgraded the liaison office to an embassy, becoming the first ASEAN Member State to do so.⁹⁹ Timor-Leste reciprocated this gesture shortly thereafter with the establishment of its embassy in Kuala Lumpur on 7 August 2002. The Malaysian Government had generously provided the Embassy's Chancery premises rent-free, purchased a new car for the official car of the Ambassador, as well as provided financial support for the operation of the Embassy. These diplomatic gestures and material support reflect Malaysia's commitment to Timor-Leste's stability, marking its entry into statehood with a partnership of genuine solidarity.

Tun Mahathir Mohamad's State Visit 2003: A Symbol of Solidarity

The official visit of Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Dili in 2003 further strengthened the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Timor-Leste. This historic event marked the first official visit by a Head of Government to the newly independent nation.¹⁰⁰ This speaks volumes of Malaysia's positive view of Timorese leadership and our commitment to deepen our ties with the country and its people.

The visit, which took place from 22 to 24 October 2003, was meant to reaffirm Malaysia's steadfast commitment to advancing bilateral relations between our two nations. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad also wished to reciprocate the visit of Timor-Leste's former Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri who had come to Malaysia in August 2002. It was no ordinary visit – the Malaysian delegation consisted of several senior Cabinet Ministers including Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar himself and approximately 40 business leaders, which indicated Malaysia's seriousness in engaging diplomatically and economically with Timor-Leste.¹⁰¹

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad not only acknowledged Timor-Leste, but also praised the new nation during a time when many other leaders did not. When he addressed the Timorese leadership, he highlighted the resilience of their people:

*"Your strength lies in your people, whose resourcefulness, determination and grit overcame 24 years of struggle. Your country has been a symbol of courage. Timor-Leste can stand tall and proud, as equals among nations."*¹⁰²

This speech was delivered at a time when some leaders remained sceptical of Timor-Leste's capabilities in the political, economic, and social spheres. His message carried considerable weight, as it was a very public validation from a respected ASEAN leader regarding the value and potential of the Timorese. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad reiterated Malaysia's welcome of Timor-Leste to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) earlier that year,¹⁰³ further reinforcing Dili's sense of belonging within the Global South. When conducting our interviews, we were heartened to observe that our

commitment to the principles of inclusivity was not birthed overnight when deciding on the theme of the ASEAN-Malaysia Chairmanship 2025. Rather, it reflects our longstanding practice of facilitating the integration of our neighbouring countries – regardless of their socio-economic status – into the region.

Tangible Outcomes and Symbolic Gestures

There were several symbolic initiatives that underscored the strength of relations between Malaysia and Timor-Leste during this visit. The Timor-Leste Government had earlier allocated Malaysia with a plot of land facing the sea for the establishment of our embassy. It was during this visit that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad laid the foundation stone for Malaysia's first embassy complex in Dili. In addition, the road facing the site where the embassy was to be built, was named Avenida da Malaysia (Malaysia Street). Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad stated that naming the road as such "reflects the strong bond of friendship between Malaysia and Timor-Leste."¹⁰⁴

The official visit was not merely symbolic in nature, but it encouraged positive outcomes and tangible results for the bilateral relations of Malaysia and Timor-Leste. For example, both governments demonstrated a shared commitment to secure future cooperation, which was put into writing through the signing of the *Economic, Technical, Scientific and Cultural Agreement*. In line with the principle of Prosper Thy Neighbour which guided our foreign policy at the time, Malaysia contributed by sharing its experience in developing infrastructure and attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).¹⁰⁵

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit also included significant financial and material contributions. For example, Malaysia gave 32 Handalan army trucks and other military equipment to Falintil-FDTL (Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste - Forças de Defesa de Timor-Leste) also known as known as F-FDTL. This assistance was able to complement Timor-Leste's security assets and enhance its logistical capabilities, thus contributing greatly to the overall strength of the nation's armed forces.¹⁰⁶ In addition, it also helped to address a critical shortage in logistical capability for the new nation's security forces.

Advocacy on the Global Stage

Malaysia has been consistent in advocating for and assisting Timor-Leste, and this was no different at the international stage. Tan Sri Hamidon Ali was Malaysia's former Permanent Representative to the United Nations during the early years of Timor-Leste's independence. He remained closely engaged throughout the nation's transition from an occupied to an independent state, as well as during the internal crisis in 2006. In our interview with him,¹⁰⁷ he explained that an internal conflict of this nature is not uncommon for countries that have just been granted full sovereignty after years of violent occupation. The *Report of the UN Independent Special Commission of Inquiry for Timor-Leste* (2006) highlighted that this internal crisis was sparked by many factors, such as deep-seated grievances within factions of the community and the national security forces.¹⁰⁸ In addition, the weaknesses within the legal system, as well as the fragile situation of Timor-Leste's institutions at the time, exacerbated tension into an eventual breakdown of law and order.

In response, Tan Sri Hamidon Ali and the Malaysian mission played a pivotal role in advocating for a renewed international presence, arguing that the premature withdrawal of UN oversight would leave the fledgling state vulnerable to further fragmentation.¹⁰⁹ In 2006, as the mandate of the United Nations Office in Timor-Leste (UNOTIL) was coming to an end a few months after the crisis erupted, Tan Sri Hamidon Ali brought attention to the Timorese environment of self-governance and its related challenges in the nascent stage of its development. He highlighted the concern that the incumbent 2007 elections could place considerable strain on Timor-Leste's democratic institutions and practices, stating that:

*"There is not only the need for the continued presence of the United Nations to provide impartial support for the conduct of free and fair elections, but also as a stabilising influence on all segments of the society throughout the period leading to the elections."*¹¹⁰

Although Tan Sri Hamidon Ali welcomed the restoration of peace that was established in Timor-Leste soon after the 2006 conflict, he continued to highlight the need for a more holistic approach to establishing (and maintaining) its security. In this regard, he felt that the UN's medium-term strategy, which was focused on socio-economic development and democratic governance, was a welcome development.¹¹¹

Tan Sri Hamidon Ali's consistent attention to the Timor-Leste cause exemplifies diplomacy in action. His efforts helped to ensure that Timor-Leste remained a priority at the United Nations level. This is a testament to Malaysia's wish of wanting what was best for Timor-Leste's long-term development, and not just offering one-off assistance during a crisis. This allowed Malaysia to always maintain the position that our support for capacity development, institutional reform, and nation-building went beyond symbolic gestures to offer tangible outcomes at the diplomatic arena. This really cemented the bilateral relationship between our two nations on grounds of consistency and sincerity throughout the years. We also feel that this may have encouraged other countries to adopt the same approach within the region.

Rapid Deployment and the Peacekeeping Legacy

When violence occurred in Timor-Leste during the internal crisis on 28 April 2006, Malaysia did not hesitate in its response. Malaysia's geographical proximity to Timor-Leste, coupled with the readiness to act quickly, allowed it to be one of the first nations to respond to the crisis. Dato' Amarjit Singh, Malaysia's former Ambassador to Timor-Leste, highlighted the speed of this deployment as one of the key factors behind the enduring gratitude felt by the Timorese leadership. He noted that Malaysia was "credited with being one of the first countries to land boots on the ground within 48 hours of a political decision being taken."¹²

Dato' Amarjit Singh's assessment is also shared by the Timorese leaders. In our interview with President Ramos-Horta, he spoke highly of the Malaysian contingent, commending Malaysia's efficiency in responding and sending contingents to Timor-Leste within a matter of days, stating that Malaysia operated as well or better than some European countries in terms of deploying forces during Timor-Leste's crisis.

This rapid deployment was not merely a logistical feat; it was evidence of Malaysia's commitment to our foreign policy principles and demonstrated the political will to commit resources and personnel for the safety and security of our neighbour. Malaysia's peacekeeping activities in Timor-Leste did not begin only after Timor-Leste attained independence in 2002; rather, it has been ongoing since 1999 and continued through 2012. During this period, Malaysia participated in a succession of

UN missions, including INTERFET, UNTAET, United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET), and United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT).¹¹³

The scale of Malaysia's contribution to these peacekeeping missions was significant. A total of 2,091 Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) personnel have served in Timor-Leste since 1999. Malaysia was among the countries that deployed the most police officers as part of the UNMIT mission around the time of the internal crisis in 2006. The majority of Malaysia's UNMIT personnel were assigned to the Formed Police Unit (FPU) tasked with crowd and riot control, while others served as United Nations Police (UNPOL) officers overseeing public safety.

In addition to deploying officers to maintain peace, Malaysia also played a key role in strengthening Timor-Leste's security infrastructure, which was in its infancy stage at the time. At the end of the RMP's 13-year assignment in Timor-Leste, Malaysia donated 29 multi-purpose vehicles worth RM3.5 million to the Timor-Leste Government.¹¹⁴ These assets were not just donations in kind but were integral in restoring law and order in Timor-Leste.

Operational Excellence and Trust

The effectiveness of the Malaysian security personnel went beyond the swiftness of our response, the number of personnel involved in the missions, and cost of equipment donated. In contrast to local perceptions regarding other foreign security personnel, the Malaysian personnel were widely regarded by the Timorese as professional, disciplined, and culturally attuned to the local population. Dato' Amarjit Singh highlighted that the Timorese leadership and citizens alike continue to speak of these contributions positively: "They remember our troops who were here. They remember them by name. They remember the commanders until today."¹¹⁵

In our conversations with Timorese across Dili, we were struck by how vividly the memory of Malaysian personnel who participated in peacekeeping missions continues to live on. It wasn't just the enhanced sense of security that the Timorese appreciated,

but more so for the compassion and cultural kinship the Malaysian personnel demonstrated. They went above and beyond their call of duty in maintaining the perimeter by experiencing life as the Timorese would, including its challenges. And that really cemented their selfless acts of service in the hearts of the Timorese they stood beside. This enduring sense of goodwill is one of the strongest indicators of Malaysia's success as partners of peace to Timor-Leste, because our contributions in peacekeeping missions still remain fresh in the minds of the Timorese long after our security personnel have left their shores.

Inclusivity in Action: The Human Connection

Peacekeeping missions are usually focused on the cessation of hostilities and restoration of order. Malaysia's experience in Timor-Leste was unique because our peacekeeping missions went beyond mere deployment. Rather, it included the important element of inclusivity with the locals. Their ability to establish a real sense of community was what contributed to the success in breaking down the walls between the peacekeeping personnel and the people. In some contexts, security personnel from foreign countries may be detached from the citizens whom they are entrusted to protect. However, this was not the case with Malaysia. This human connection in peacekeeping missions was integral for stabilising the country and building trust during the fragile early years of independence.

In our conversation with President Ramos-Horta, he reflected on the Malaysian contingent's ability to integrate with the local population:

*"I observed that those [among the different security personnel] who merged much more easily with the community was the Malaysian force, they really merged with the community... God, what a scene at the airport [when they left]. People crying to see some of the Malaysian military [leave], the Major crying, very emotional."*¹¹⁶

The special relationship that our security personnel established was something we were so fortunate to have verified, not only by interviews with key persons from Malaysia, but was also reflected in the sharing by Timorese leaders and officials.

Shared Cultural Affinity

Another factor that facilitated the close relationship between the Malaysian personnel and the Timorese was a sense of shared cultural resonance. Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar observed that the Timorese share affinities with us in terms of our cultural civilisation. This familiarity brought a certain amount of ease to the Malaysian personnel in navigating the social landscape with empathy for the local community.

Dato' Amarjit Singh shared that Malaysian security personnel and officers are well-liked in Timor-Leste because they can speak Bahasa as well as English. This allowed them to bridge the linguistic gap that often hindered other international actors in Timor-Leste from truly immersing themselves in the life of the local community. This cultural proximity created a warm environment where Malaysian personnel were seen not as foreign outsiders, but as much-loved members of the Timorese people's extended family. There is a quote widely attributed to Mr Nelson Mandela which states, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart". In this instance, we find the quote to aptly describe the closeness between the Malaysian contingent and the Timorese.

Community Engagement and Celebration

The bond shared between the Malaysian personnel and the Timorese was further strengthened through their frequent participation in local social events. For example, our security personnel would often engage with the local community, attending barbeque cookouts, celebrations, and other festivals, even if these events were not part of their official functions or officially conducted by the Government. This exemplified their integration with diverse groups in the community.

In our interview with Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, he shared his thoughts about this unique relationship: "A brotherly feeling is not unnatural. *Kalau dalam bahasa Melayu tu, kita senang bermesra,*" which is generally translated to mean "we easily get along." While the logistical and material support provided by the Malaysian Government

had contributed to the reduction of violence and reestablished the rule of law, the enduring relationship between our personnel and the Timorese created a sense of trust and safety which is integral in sustaining peace. This helped to restore a sense of normalcy and joy to a people who had overcome the double burden of occupation and internal strife, enabling them to move forward and finally begin the work of building their nation.

A Teary Farewell

The depth of this genuine bond is perhaps best reflected in the poignant reaction of the Timorese when it came to the time for the Malaysian contingent to depart for home. It was particularly evident when the RMP ended their mission with UNMIT at the end of 2012, in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2037.¹¹⁷ The event was attended by the leadership and ordinary citizens of Timor-Leste. Dato' Amarjit Singh recounted stories that were also told to us by President Ramos-Horta regarding the departure of Malaysian troops. The President, along with the ordinary Timorese, went to the airport to send off our personnel at the end of the tour. The heartfelt goodbyes were indicative that it was more than just a political relationship. It was, in fact, a sincere brotherhood that would stand the test of time.



First day of school at Fatu Ahi with desks and benches made by UNTAET.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Eskinder Debebe.



UNPOL assisted Timor-Leste police in firearms training to reform, restructure, and rebuild the PNTL.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Martine Perret.



Teammates carried the coffin of the UNPOL officer, Inspector Benet Pawun, which arrived at the Police Air Unit at Kuching International Airport. Inspector Benet Pawun died of an illness while serving in Dili, Timor-Leste.

Credit: fotoBERNAMA
COPYRIGHT RESERVED.





UNMIT's Malaysian police officers said goodbye as they boarded their return flight home in Dili.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Bernardino Soares.



Family members could not hold back their grief upon seeing the coffin, draped with the Jalur Gemilang and the UN flag, containing the body of United Nations Police (UNPOL) officer, Inspector Benet Pawun, which arrived at the Police Air Unit at Kuching International Airport.

*Credit: fotoBERNAMA
COPYRIGHT RESERVED.*



Timor-Leste's independence leader, Prime Minister Gusmão who was Timor-Leste's President at the time, paid a courtesy call on Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Malaysian Prime Minister's office for a three-day official visit. Far left is President Ramos-Horta, who was Timor-Leste's Foreign Minister at the time.

Credit: fotoBERNAMA COPYRIGHT RESERVED.



The Inspector General of Police (IGP) at the time, Tan Sri Musa Hasan (right), welcomed the return of the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) personnel who served with the UNMIT mission in Timor-Leste. Pictured at the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) Subang Air Base.

Credit: fotoBERNAMA COPYRIGHT RESERVED.



The welcome ceremony of Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim's official visit to Timor-Leste on 23 September 2025 included being presented with the *tais* - a traditional handwoven textile of deep cultural significance to the Timorese people and being entertained with performances by a traditional welcoming troupe and a school drum band.

Credit: fotoBERNAMA COPYRIGHT RESERVED.



Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim's historic, two-day official visit to Timor-Leste aimed at strengthening bilateral ties and supporting the nation's accession as ASEAN's 11th Member State.

Credit: fotoBERNAMA COPYRIGHT RESERVED.



Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Prime Minister of Timor-Leste, Xanana Gusmão held a joint press conference after a bilateral meeting at the Government Palace.

Credit: fotoBERNAMA COPYRIGHT RESERVED.

Chapter 6: Building Capacity

While political will is a strong driver for post-conflict transition, it cannot sustain a nation's recovery in isolation. For an emerging economy like Timor-Leste, sustainable development requires substantial investment in institutional resilience, physical infrastructure, and human capital. As a young nation born at the dawn of the 21st century, Timor-Leste's nation-building efforts in 1999 were met with several challenges such as the collapse of its infrastructure and forced displacement of its people. Thus, capacity building became essential to the continuity and eventual growth of Timor-Leste.

Strengthening Defence Post-Conflict: The Malaysian Defence Cooperation Programme (MDCP)

Initially, Malaysia's support in strengthening Timor-Leste's security environment was characterised by peacekeeping and immediate security interventions. Over time, this relationship matured into a structured defence partnership through the Malaysian Defence Cooperation Programme (MDCP), which prioritises long-term institutional growth over active crisis management. The MDCP is a professionalisation initiative for the F-FDTL and was first introduced in 2002. At that time, it functioned as a platform offering specialised military training to foreign militaries, in which Timor-Leste was a main beneficiary.¹¹⁸

The MDCP's training scope is aimed at establishing a well-rounded military corps. Courses offered include ship diving, language training, the law of armed conflict, and joint warfare, all of which F-FDTL officers have actively participated in since 2002.¹¹⁹ Apart from boosting tactical skills, these programmes are also curated to foster an understanding of international humanitarian law and modern military doctrine amongst the Timorese defence forces.

Cooperation in recent years has intensified to include high-level strategic training. This is exemplified by the participation of Captain Helio Filipe Dias Quintas, a Timorese officer in the prestigious Malaysian Armed Forces Command and Staff

Course, a programme intended for high-potential mid-ranking officers. In addition, Timorese officers were also trained in courses such as the International Law of Armed Conflict (ILOAC) by the Malaysian Peacekeeping Centre (MPC), a Malaysian operation training institute which has received UN-accreditation.¹²⁰ Familiarising the Timorese defence officials with such UN-accredited courses is important as Timor-Leste prepares itself for an increased role in global affairs.

Looking ahead, both Malaysia and Timor-Leste have ratified the *Agreement on Cooperation in Defence between the Government of Malaysia and the Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste*. The bilateral defence agreement will see an increased bilateral defence cooperation on strategic communications, exchange of information and personnel, joint exercises, as well as collaboration in the field of science, technology, and the defence industries.¹²¹ These efforts are significant, as they highlight that the defence relationship between our two countries is not static. Rather, it has evolved and is maturing from basic training to include complex, strategic interoperability.

Strengthening Institutions: Building the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Malaysia's contributions to Timor-Leste are not limited to security alone. In fact, one of Malaysia's most valuable but less documented contributions has been in the establishment of the country's diplomatic organ. In our discussion with Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar and Dato' Dr Rameez, both emphasised the historic contribution made by the late Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Mohamad, who was the former Secretary-General of Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1996-2001 and advisor to the Timorese Government.

Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar also indicated that Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Mohamad was instrumental in establishing Timor-Leste's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which was later named the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation), which is a significant milestone in our bilateral cooperation. His contributions extended beyond advisory functions; he also played a central role in training the first generation of Timorese diplomats in the art of diplomacy. Dato' Amarjit Singh shared a lovely anecdote with us that these diplomats were lovingly referred to by Malaysian diplomats as "The Kadir Cohort". This foundational cohort would then be posted to, or helped in forming the staff of Timor-Leste's multiple missions across the world. The passing

of Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Mohamad on 15 July 2024 was deeply felt not only by the Malaysian diplomats, but also by the Timorese leaders and its diplomatic corp. In a letter from the President Ramos-Horta to Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Mohamad's wife, Puan Sri Nora, the President wrote:

“Ambassador Kadir was my Senior Counsellor during my tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Timor-Leste, from 2001 to 2003. His contributions were fundamental to the establishment of the basic structure of Timor-Leste’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. His guidance and counsel on political issues were invaluable to our nation during those formative years as we established the services of the state’s diplomatic and consular network.”

Based on our research, we found that Malaysia’s contributions in helping to form Timor-Leste’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs have had a long-lasting impact on the local diplomatic community. Although Table 1 below does not represent the entirety of Malaysia’s efforts, it highlights some notable contributions:

Table 1: Summary of Malaysia’s Early Support for Timor-Leste’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Category	Specific Focus/Contribution
High-Level Advisory	Senior Malaysian diplomats, such as Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Mohamad and Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi, served as advisors to the Ministry.
Organisational Design	Assisted in building the organisational chart and establishing key departments within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the protocol and consular divisions.
Mission Establishment	Provided technical guidance on how to establish and operate diplomatic missions.
Diplomatic Training	Facilitated study and training for junior officers in Dili, as well as at Malaysia’s National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN), to build their diplomatic capacity.
Logistical Support	Fully funded and provided the location, housing, and transportation for the Timor-Leste Embassy in Kuala Lumpur.

Embodying Inclusivity: Championing ASEAN Membership for Timor-Leste

Malaysia has long been a consistent advocate for Timor-Leste's full entry into ASEAN. In our interview with Dato' Dr Rameez, he shared that very soon after the nation's independence, Timor-Leste expressed the aspiration of becoming an ASEAN Member State one day, and sought advice from Malaysia regarding the ways which Timor-Leste can work towards achieving that. This was a strong indication that from the beginning of the establishment of this sovereign state, Timor-Leste had always felt an affinity to ASEAN and hoped to one day be a part of the bloc.

That said, the pathway to ASEAN was not easy. Initially, there were some reservations expressed regarding Timor-Leste's inclusion into ASEAN, particularly concerns over its economic capacity and the geopolitical alignment of the former Portuguese colony. This scepticism was addressed by Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim when he emphasised that the membership requirement should not strictly rest on the economic strength of a particular country:

*"It is not appropriate to measure the value of membership only on the aspect of economic strength alone. However, what is important is the determination and commitment, vision and national spirit of the nation."*¹²²

In our interview with Mr Lisualdo Gaspar, we found his perspective regarding reservations against Timor-Leste's inclusion to be quite inspiring. He did not feel slighted when reflecting on certain critiques of his country's ability. Rather, he viewed the comments as essential inputs for national improvement. His warm smile throughout our discussion conveyed a sense of optimism rather than defensiveness. Mr Gaspar acknowledged that internal assessments can sometimes fail to identify specific areas for growth. Therefore, Timor-Leste welcomes the external guidance as a necessary tool to ensure that administrative and technical capacities meet the expected regional requirements. He paused before elaborating on Malaysia's role in facilitating Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession:

*"I must say, Malaysia played a crucial role. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was very instrumental. If it weren't for Malaysia and the Prime Minister's leadership in building consensus among other leaders, we might not be in ASEAN. He committed to us from day one of his Chairmanship."*¹²³

On 11 October 2024 during the Handing Over Ceremony of the ASEAN Chairmanship from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Malaysia in Vientiane – an occasion already laden with institutional priorities – Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim emphasised in his remarks that:

*"ASEAN's journey began nearly six decades ago, inspired by a vision of peace, stability and prosperity. Today, ASEAN stands strong, ready to embrace the future with confidence. The future of ASEAN must include Timor-Leste, whose inclusion will expand our region's economy and contribute to fulfilling our grand vision."*¹²⁴

His statement at the Handing Over Ceremony in 2024 sent the strong message that Timor-Leste's inclusion into ASEAN was a priority for Malaysia. President Ramos Horta also recognised Malaysia's unwavering support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership. Despite the arduous accession journey that his country had to go through, he attributed Timor-Leste's eventual success in joining ASEAN to Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship. Malaysia's strong advocacy for the inclusion of Timor-Leste into the ASEAN family is partly due to the strong belief that its membership would only strengthen regional solidarity and ASEAN centrality. In our interview with our Foreign Minister, he explained that:

*"Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN ensures that the entire Southeast Asia region remains neutral from major power rivalry. It helps strengthen ASEAN unity through an additional non-aligned regional voice in the face of a complex geopolitical landscape. For example, from the political-security perspective, the accession of Timor-Leste to the SEANWFZ Treaty has expanded the geographical scope of the Treaty, further strengthening nuclear disarmament in the region. This reinforces Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, and enhances ASEAN's credibility and central role in shaping and safeguarding the regional security architecture."*¹²⁵

Timor-Leste's integration into the ASEAN fold helped to fortify the region against external fragmentations that could undermine ASEAN Centrality. To transform this vision of a unified, non-aligned Southeast Asia into a functional reality, Malaysia has prioritised the narrowing of development gaps through concrete institutional support. This transition from high-level advocacy to ground-level empowerment is best exemplified by the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP), which serves as a vital instrument in preparing Timor-Leste's civil service and governance structures for the rigorous demands of ASEAN membership.

Developing Human Capital: The Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP)

A nation's growth is powered by its "engine"; its human capital. Putting this philosophy into practice, Malaysia introduced the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP), a pioneering capacity building initiative founded on the idea of championing South-South Cooperation. Through the MTCP, Malaysia is able to share our positive development experiences with countries in the Global South, including Timor-Leste. This is done primarily to encourage self-reliance and strengthen the overall development of nations. The generous development support that Malaysia provides through the MTCP in turn helps to enhance Malaysia's soft power across the Global South.

Scale and Scope of Support

As of recent records, 1,179 Timor-Leste participants representing a wide range of agencies and ministries have successfully concluded their participation in the various MTCP courses.¹²⁶ In preparation for Timor-Leste's eventual ASEAN membership, the scale of the MTCP programmes has been significantly expanded and accelerated in recent years. A total of 319 Timorese officials benefited from the programme in 2025 alone, under a sizable fund allocation of RM1.97 billion for capacity building programmes by the Malaysian Government.¹²⁷

Matching with Timor-Leste's need for bureaucratic infrastructure development, the MTCP curriculum focused on a broad spectrum of specialised governance and technical skills. For example, many Timorese officials benefitted from courses ranging from Good Governance & Institutional Reforms and International Basic Maritime Crime Scene Preservation, to Networking Technology with IoT Applications and Sustainable and Resilient Tourism.¹²⁸ The variety of courses offered indicates the multidimensional needs of Timor-Leste's nascent public administration.

Targeted Support for ASEAN Accession

As part of its full integration requirement into ASEAN, Timor-Leste was required to adhere to the *Roadmap* introduced by ASEAN to accelerate the fulfillment of ASEAN's legal requirements by Timor-Leste. To facilitate this process, Malaysia allocated RM 3.7 million specifically for capacity building programmes tailored to Timor-Leste's accession needs.¹²⁹

Mr Devrin Jeck, Undersecretary of the International Cooperation and Development Division (ICADD) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, shared with us that the intensification of these initiatives were customised to meet the needs of Timorese officials. In 2025, there were 12 MTCP programmes curated specifically for Timor-Leste's officials' capacity building. In addition to this, 5 programmes tailored for ASEAN were also made available for the Timorese officials to foster deeper connection between Timor-Leste's officials and other ASEAN Member States' officials.

According to Mr Devrin, the principal objective of these customised programmes was to support Timor-Leste in acceding to ASEAN's legal instruments and agreements. Beyond policy alignment, there was also a need for Timor-Leste to boost its operational readiness capacity, in which a Special Attachment Programme was introduced. Mr Devrin explained the idea behind the programme:

"MTCP has organised an Attachment Programme for Timor-Leste Capacity Building Towards Full Accession to ASEAN. Selected Timor-Leste Officials is stationed with ASEAN 2025 Main Logistic Secretariat (SILA) and ASEAN-Malaysia National Secretariat (AMNS) to build the necessary administrative and logistical capacities

*necessary in relation to conducting and engaging in ASEAN meetings. This is imperative to Timor-Leste's readiness to host ASEAN meetings within a rotating chairmanship."*¹³⁰

Beyond a theoretical curriculum, this hands-on approach was aimed at providing a practical experience of the machinery of ASEAN diplomacy to Timorese officials, allowing them to be immersed in the logistics, protocol, and secretariat duties ahead of its eventual ASEAN accession in October 2025. Mr Azril Abd Aziz, Deputy Secretary-General of AMNS for the ASEAN Political-Security Community Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, underscored the benefits of this experiential learning. He noted that theoretical knowledge cannot replace the reality of managing ASEAN's complex processes. By witnessing the Chairmanship machinery from the inside, Timorese officials gained invaluable knowledge ahead of their becoming a Member State.¹³¹ The impact of the MTCP for Timorese officials is particularly evident in Timor-Leste's management of a plethora of commitments related to regional economic agreements.¹³²

Operational Issues and Adaptive Strategies

Although the MTCP adopted a positive outlook in its formulation and implementation, the mobilisation of these programmes were not without their unique challenges. During our fieldwork in Dili, we noticed the existence of a barrier in language and communication style. This may be attributed to the Timorese using Tetum and Portuguese as their main languages. This leads to a gap in language and communication, especially among the older generation or those who came from areas outside of Dili. Customised courses such as English Language in Diplomacy and ASEAN Language of Meetings and Negotiation were therefore tailor-made to fit the needs of the Timorese officials and address the issue.

Bureaucratic constraints presented another unique mobilisation challenge for the MTCP. Mr Devrin shared that Timor-Leste's agencies are relatively new in its establishment and often must refine their administrative structures as well as clarify internal roles. This inevitably results in last-minute coordination on the side of Timor-Leste to identify the most appropriate candidates for the MTCP programmes. Any administrative delay would affect immigration processing and logistical planning.

To mitigate these issues and minimise redundancies, ICADD had taken proactive measures to actively engage with the Malaysian mission in Dili and identify priority areas for the Timorese officials.

Scholarships

As part of our long-term human capital development strategy, and in recognition of the need to look beyond short-term training, Malaysia also offers scholarships to students from Timor-Leste. In fact, a total of 11 Timorese students have benefited from MTCP scholarships for postgraduate degrees since 2003.¹³³ Meanwhile, Mr Devrin shared that in 2025 alone, RM388,000 worth of scholarship funds were allocated for Timorese scholars seeking to pursue advanced degrees in Malaysian public universities aimed at creating a cohort of Timorese future leaders with strong educational linkage to Malaysia. We also noted that during Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim's Official Visit to Dili in September 2025, the Malaysian Government reaffirmed its commitment to these training programmes, which include critical areas such as higher education.¹³⁴

In the 7th Malaysia-Australia Annual Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Statement, both governments welcomed the "continued investment in scholarships by both [nations]" and noted Malaysia's pleasure in welcoming more students, including "an increased number of Malaysian Government scholarship recipients at Australian universities". Whilst the Joint Statement does not explicitly refer to trilateral education cooperation with Timor-Leste specifically, the authors opine that such an initiative could serve as an extension of existing trilateral initiatives between Malaysia, Australia, and Timor-Leste.

In our interview with Mr Gaspar, he expressed that this form of trilateral cooperation between Malaysia, Australia, and Timor-Leste is much needed. He felt that it would be very beneficial if the allocation of scholarships by the Australian Government could be redirected to Timorese students to pursue their tertiary education in Australian universities with physical branch campuses in Malaysia, such as Monash University Malaysia, Curtin University Malaysia, Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus (Kuching), and University of Wollongong (UOW) Malaysia. This would allow for more Timorese students to gain Australian-funded scholarships, as the fees in

these universities are lower in comparison to the campuses in Australia. By leveraging the cost-effectiveness of Malaysia's world-class educational infrastructure alongside Australia's funding and academic excellence, this proposed model reflects a shared commitment to maximising opportunities for the next generation of Timorese leaders.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

A skilled workforce is also a vital prerequisite for any economy that seeks to move beyond Timor-Leste's dependency on oil revenues. To assist in the country's earnest economic diversification efforts, Malaysia has offered collaborations in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), Malaysia's successful workforce skilling initiative, to equally build and enhance the workforce capacity in Timor-Leste.

Over the years, Malaysia's role and support in this area has become more pronounced, especially regarding Timor-Leste's inclusion into ASEAN. The 7th Malaysia-Australia Annual Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Statement highlighted a shared commitment to continue and strengthen educational cooperation, specifically mentioning "Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) at the school level" and "teacher training and professional development."¹³⁵

Institutional Collaboration: UniKL and IOB

On 28 August 2024, a Letter of Intent (LOI) was signed between Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) and the Institute of Business (IOB) Timor-Leste, which marked a pivotal achievement in institutional partnerships between Malaysia and Timor-Leste. The agreement sought to leverage on mutual strengths in joint TVET programmes, research, and initiatives to strengthen industrial practices between our two countries. This partnership was formalised during the official visit of Dato' Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Rural and Regional Development of Malaysia, to Timor-Leste between 28 to 30 August 2024.¹³⁶

This collaboration is intentionally designed to be output-oriented and rests on the model of practicality. It encompasses provisions for the exchange of information, technology, and expertise through structured training programmes and workshops.

Significantly, UniKL has pledged to disburse 50 scholarships to deserving Timorese students to pursue their advanced studies.¹³⁷ Beyond offering immediate educational opportunities, which would undoubtedly assist in enhancing employability and career prospects of Timorese students upon graduation, this move seeks to help establish the key academic infrastructure vital for the sustainability of TVET institutions in Timor-Leste. Guided by the principles of Technopreneurship and Industry 4.0 in the latest MTCP courses, the initiative showcases Malaysia's effort to sustainably develop Timor-Leste's emerging with the skills required to navigate the demands of the modern digital economy.

Empowering the Grassroots: Rural Development

As Timor-Leste is significantly made up of a rural population, it is imperative that national capacity building programmes extend beyond the capital, Dili, to effectively reach communities at the grassroots level. This is particularly important given that poverty remains more pervasive in the rural areas of Timor-Leste. Data from the *Tatoli! 2025 Survey* indicates that low income is a main concern for many Timorese, affecting 53 percent of the respondents.¹³⁸ In response, the *Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030* reflects a concerted effort by the Timor-Leste government to address and strategically alleviate the issue of poverty in Timor-Leste, notably through the modernisation of the agriculture sector as a key driver of inclusive growth.¹³⁹

In this respect, Malaysia too, has embodied the spirit of inclusivity within our foreign policy, driving development partnerships that focus on rural areas to meet the needs of the grassroots level in Timor-Leste. The Ministry of Rural and Regional Development Malaysia (KKDW), through the Institute for Rural Advancement (INFRA) has spearheaded specialised courses aimed at training Timorese community leaders. In the earlier stages, the courses targeted *suco* (village) chiefs, and it was later refined to train government officials in charge of overseeing rural development in Timor-Leste.

Under our framework of South-South Cooperation, the inaugural training programme, Empowering Community Leaders Towards Sustainable Rural Development, was held from 23 to 28 September 2025 in Putrajaya.¹⁴⁰ The programme welcomed the 10-member delegation from Timor-Leste's Ministry of Rural Development and Community Housing (MDRHC).¹⁴¹ The programme aimed to build awareness of Malaysia's successful models of rural administration and community development amongst the Timorese officials. The knowledge and skills gained by the officials during the course are hoped to power the growth of sustainable development projects in their own communities. From our perspective, this bottom-up model introduced by Malaysia is significant, as it has the potential to address issues of poverty and malnutrition through holistic initiatives like high-level diplomatic training that positively impacts the grassroots population.

In summary, Malaysia's support for Timor-Leste has transitioned from immediate post-conflict assistance into a mature and forward-looking partnership focused on long-term institutional strengthening and capacity building. This cooperation spans critical sectors, including the professionalisation of the defence forces through the MDCP, the foundational establishment of Timor-Leste's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and consistent diplomatic advocacy for its ASEAN membership. Furthermore, through initiatives like the MTCP, TVET collaborations, and rural development programmes, Malaysia has facilitated the transfer of technical expertise, provided scholarships for future leaders, and addressed grassroots development needs. Malaysia's commitment goes beyond mere policy. Throughout the years, it has reflected our sincere, long-term investment in seeing a neighbour thrive. From the early days of nation-building to Timor-Leste's recent accession to ASEAN, Malaysia has been genuine in our efforts to help Timor-Leste stand tall and self-reliant on the global stage.



The Embassy of Malaysia in Dili introduced Malaysia to 700 Timorese students of the AHHA Centre - Malaysia's biggest NGO in Timor-Leste. The event comprised a country information presentation, the history of our bilateral relations, the current state of cooperation with Timor-Leste, as well as a cultural performance.

Credit: Embassy of Malaysia in Dili.



The Embassy of Malaysia collaborated with a group of volunteer Malaysian teachers to successfully conduct a comprehensive educational workshop from 16-19 April 2024 at a Timorese secondary public school.

Credit: Embassy of Malaysia in Dili.



Officials from various ministries and agencies in Timor-Leste received briefings from the Economic Planning Unit of the Negeri Sembilan State Secretary's Office and Invest Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia as part of the MTCP: ASEAN Trade Facilitation programme in October 2025.

Credit: Centre for Political Studies and Economic Diplomacy (PSED), IDFR.



Participants of the MTCP: ASEAN Trade Facilitation programme pictured at the ASEAN Dome, a transparent "rainforest" pavilion created for the 47th ASEAN Summit in October 2025. The Summit marked Timor-Leste's admission as the eleventh member of ASEAN.

Credit: Centre for Political Studies and Economic Diplomacy (PSED), IDFR.



Participants of the MFAC Retreat in May 2003 pictured with the late Tan Sri Abdul Kadir, standing 5th from the left in the second row. Mr Lisualdo Gaspar is in the front row, first from the left.

Credit: The Embassy of Timor-Leste in Malaysia.



Mr Lisualdo Gaspar, who is now the current Ambassador of Timor-Leste to Malaysia, fondly recalls the times he spent with the late Tan Sri Abdul Kadir and spoke of Tan Sri Abdul Kadir's mentorship which he had greatly benefitted from.

Credit: Author's own.

Chapter 7: The Road to ASEAN Membership

Timor-Leste's journey towards ASEAN membership was long and difficult, yet very much necessary for its eventual inclusion into the bloc. For Malaysia, our commitment to support Timor-Leste can be traced back to the Prosper Thy Neighbour principle. However, over time, our foreign policy has evolved to more substantially reflect the spirit of inclusivity – starting with welcoming the last country within Southeast Asia into the regional fold. Mr Azril remarked that facilitating Timor-Leste's entry represents a significant milestone for the Founding Members of ASEAN, ensuring that the bloc's representation aligns with the geographic reality of the region. His statement reflects the recognition that it would be difficult for ASEAN to represent the region fully if Timor-Leste is left on the periphery.

Our national commitment to regional inclusivity is also motivated by our moral obligation to our neighbours. Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim has persistently advocated for the Timor-Leste cause and its people. Malaysia has supported the Timorese journey towards self-determination and assisted with its subsequent nation-building as adherence to our "voice of conscience".¹⁴² In his address at the 47th ASEAN Summit, where Timor-Leste's admission was formalised, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim stated:

*"Timor-Leste's place here completes the ASEAN family – reaffirming our shared destiny and deep sense of regional kinship. Within this community, Timor-Leste's development and its strategic autonomy will find firm and lasting support."*¹⁴³

The year 2025 thus marks a momentous time in the history of Timor-Leste. The nation's accession to ASEAN was formally realised at the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 26 October 2025. This moment carried profound significance for the Timorese leadership, reflecting years of sustained effort and diplomatic commitment towards regional integration since the country first officially applied for ASEAN membership in 2011.

Cultural Integration and the “ASEAN Way”

However, geographical proximity and a shared sense of responsibility to our neighbours are not the sole determinants for ASEAN membership. Cultural affinity and adherence to the principles of the “ASEAN Way” such as non-interference, consensus-building, and peaceful settlement of disputes is also integral to achieving genuine inclusivity within the region. In the early stages of Timor-Leste’s journey into ASEAN, Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar noted that certain perceptions about Timor-Leste within the bloc posed a significant hurdle for regional integration and solidarity. He shared that for Timor-Leste to be fully embraced, it would need to “behave in a way that is very ASEAN”. This would require Timor-Leste to resonate with ASEAN’s norms and values, as our shared future is inextricably linked to our shared identity and mutual sense of belonging. Based on our other interviews, it can be reasonably inferred that the cultural gaps that may have previously existed due to ties with Timor-Leste’s colonial past have narrowed considerably. Today, Timor-Leste has clearly shown its commitment to ASEAN norms.

In addition to the need for cultural integration, Timor-Leste also had to contend with and dispel the perception that its inclusion would be a financial “burden” to ASEAN owing to its status as an emerging economy. Prime Minister Gusmão stated in his speech at Oxford’s Blavatnik School of Government in 2018 that Timor-Leste had to struggle with the negative view that they were a “fragile” or “failed” state. He added that these descriptions of his country can sometimes “over-cloud the mindset of development and humanitarian experts and policy makers”. However, these concerns bore no weight, as explained by Mr Azril Abd Aziz in our discussions with him. He clarified that ASEAN’s operating budget is shared equally among Member States. Therefore, the addition of a new member actually reduces the individual financial contribution required from existing members. Mr Azril explained:

“In fact, Timor-Leste entering ASEAN will lessen our financial burden. Now the budget of ASEAN will be divided by 11, not by 10 so it is less. What additional financial burdens do we have to pay? So I think that argument doesn’t hold water.”¹⁴⁴

Perhaps the perception of an economic burden may be due to the lack of understanding of the actual cost structure associated with ASEAN processes, particularly in relation to summit participation and the hosting of official delegations. These expenditures are borne by the respective countries, not by the ASEAN common fund. Therefore, there is no additional burden to other Member States due to the inclusion of Timor-Leste into the bloc. This is why perspective is important when it comes to analysing an issue. Malaysia (and ASEAN as a whole) welcomes Timor-Leste as the newest member of its family and views it as an untapped market with considerable potential for growth. In our interview with our Foreign Minister, he highlighted the importance of regional solidarity and extensive functional cooperation frameworks with Dialogue Partners in helping to advance a nation in the early stages of its development. He also emphasised that:

"...Timor-Leste's inclusion should not be viewed as a strain, but rather as a long-term investment in ASEAN's collective future. Timor-Leste possesses considerable natural and maritime resources, strategic geographic positioning, and growing economic potential, all of which can contribute meaningfully to ASEAN's development, including in areas such as food security, energy, connectivity, and the blue economy."¹⁴⁵

In addition, the integration of Timor-Leste into the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is expected to drive improvements in its legal and regulatory frameworks. This will attract more businesses to invest in the Timor-Leste market. Mr Azril explained that while the Return on Investment (ROI) may not be immediate, the opportunities available and the ongoing alignment of standards will create avenues for businesses to thrive, similar to the development trajectory seen in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Dato' Amarjit Singh is of the same opinion, noting that Malaysian companies are already well-positioned to benefit from this integration. In our conversations with him, he shared that there are over 250 Malaysian entities registered in Timor-Leste as of 2025. The accession to ASEAN gives an added attraction for businesses, as it provides a formalised structure to protect and expand commercial interests.¹⁴⁶ Thus, Timor-Leste's integration into ASEAN should be seen as an expansion of the regional market and forward-looking investment in the region's economic stability, not a charitable handout.

Timor-Leste's Commitment to Meeting Requirements

Historically, there has been no fixed set of procedures for the inclusion of Member States into ASEAN, as the decision for membership (and its criteria) is a political decision that may change according to time and circumstance. For example, the admission of the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam) in the late 1990s was motivated by the strategic move to consolidate the region and enhance collective security. As such, a nation's institutional capacity is not always made to be the benchmark for accession. In the case of Timor-Leste, there were many technical requirements to be met as set out in the *Roadmap*.

The process of becoming a Member State is already quite complex, especially for a young nation which has only attained its independence 23 years ago. During President Ramos-Horta's address in a forum by think-tank Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI) in Jakarta, he jocularly remarked that "It's easier to reach the gates of heaven than the gate of ASEAN. It seems that to join ASEAN you must meet all the criteria to enter heaven."¹⁴⁷

Jokes aside, his statement reflects the reality of the many procedures, processes, and instruments that needed to be adhered to before a nation can be admitted into ASEAN. That said, Mr Gaspar shared that the *Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full Membership into ASEAN* in 2023 has been extremely helpful in preparing Timor-Leste for its accession.¹⁴⁸ In just a few short years, the nation demonstrated extraordinary political will in meeting the rigorous criteria set by ASEAN. This is further exemplified through Timor-Leste's significant financial contribution of 200,000 USD towards the establishment of the Timor-Leste Unit at the ASEAN Secretariat.¹⁴⁹

Malaysia's Diplomatic Advocacy: The "Discount" Strategy

To facilitate the accession even further, Malaysia employed a "discount" strategy during its ASEAN Chairmanship, recognising that it may take a few more years before Timor-Leste would be able to fulfil each of the many technical requirements outlined in the *Roadmap*. Acknowledging this reality, Malaysia advocated for a phased approach, admitting Timor-Leste based on certain key commitments first, while allowing the

remaining requirements to be completed post- accession. Mr Azril explained the rationale to us: "Because once you become an ASEAN member, you get certain benefits... You get access to ASEAN initiatives and activities... So, in our view [Malaysia], we thought that if they come in first, we can also help them speed up the process".¹⁵⁰

If Timor-Leste could ratify critical agreements, then the less critical criteria may be deferred to the post-accession period. This pragmatic approach was crucial in seeing Timor-Leste join ASEAN on 26 October 2025. By admitting Timor-Leste, ASEAN opened the door to resources that were currently inaccessible to it as an observer. Mr Azril explained:

*"In our calculations... it may be faster if they be given certain discounts. Because once you become an ASEAN Member State, you get certain benefits. One of it is you get access to dialogue partners. You get access to ASEAN initiatives and activities... The Dialogue Partner funds... So in our view, we thought that if they come in first, we also help them speed up the process."*¹⁵¹

This approach challenges the notion of membership as a "reward" for the development a nation has achieved – suggesting instead that potential membership is a more significant motivator for development. Mr Azril drew a parallel to the inclusion of other Member States into ASEAN, stating: "We didn't have a roadmap for Myanmar. We didn't have a roadmap for Laos. So why now? As long as they can fulfil the [basic] requirements, they [Timor-Leste] should be given the membership."

Prioritising Key Commitments

Malaysia's advocacy for a more flexible approach to Timor-Leste's accession requirements culminated in a decisive shift at the 46th ASEAN Summit in May 2025. At that meeting, the leaders agreed to admit Timor-Leste as the 11th member at the 47th Summit in October 2025, effectively modifying the trajectory of the *Roadmap*. According to Mr Azril, this decision placed greater emphasis on Timor-Leste's ability to secure and commit to key commitments.

Rather than strictly requiring Timor-Leste to accede to all 66 economic agreements before its inclusion into ASEAN, the focus shifted to a critical subset of instruments. Mr Azril highlighted the intensity of the diplomatic efforts involved, and that Malaysia's Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (MITI) played a particularly active role in negotiating with ASEAN Member States and with Timor-Leste to ensure that Timor-Leste can fulfil all the key commitments by October 2025.

The strategy spearheaded by Malaysia proved instrumental in enabling Timor-Leste to meet the necessary milestones necessary for its accession to ASEAN. That said, strong political will was required to achieve the desired result within a span of just two years. The success of this effort is evidence of the Timorese Government's commitment, as demonstrated by its institutional restructuring, financial allocations, and active participation in regional mechanisms.

Institutional Dedication

The Timor-Leste Government has undertaken commendable efforts to align its institutional machinery and regulatory frameworks with ASEAN standards. Notably, Timor-Leste successfully fulfilled key preparatory requirements related to the establishment of a dedicated diplomatic mission in Jakarta and the designation of national focal points.¹⁵² This commitment is further reflected in the "two parallel governments" approach described by Prime Minister Gusmão, which was intended to ensure the smooth functioning of both domestic affairs and regional diplomatic engagement. Dato' Amarjit Singh highlighted the scale of this undertaking in our discussion:

*"The Prime Minister [Gusmão] said that after 26 October, we will have two parallel governments. One government to attend all ASEAN meetings and one government to run the country. ... So, that signals a realisation on the part of the Chief Executive that they will have to remobilise resources, commit to endless ASEAN meetings and discussions."*¹⁵³

The requirement to participate in the many ASEAN meetings presents a formidable challenge for any new Member State, particularly for an emerging economy like Timor-Leste. The country has had to bear considerable expense, reorganise its government

machinery, and reform its institutions to meet these requirements. Yet, the young nation persevered through the challenges, which they viewed as an opportunity for their growth and development. According to the *Progress Report*, Timor-Leste was able to achieve an 83.6 percent attendance rate for participating in 484 ASEAN meetings in 2024 alone.¹⁵⁴ Such a high level of participation reflects the nation's dedication to the criteria of the *Roadmap* and the *ASEAN Charter*.

By May 2025, Timor-Leste had successfully met key *Roadmap* criteria relating to institutional setup. Notably, the "Inter-Ministerial Technical Working Groups on ASEAN Integration" were established through Government Resolution No. 15/2024.¹⁵⁵ This mechanism enabled Ms Milena Maria da Costa Rangel to coordinate and supervise the three Community Pillars (Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural).

This structure is important, as it promotes efficiency due to a more streamlined flow of information. Timor-Leste's Director-General for ASEAN Affairs heads the National Secretariat, and is responsible for ASEAN-related decision-making. In addition, directors have been appointed to head each of the three Community Pillars tasked with coordinating with other ASEAN Member States on matters within their purview.¹⁵⁶ This arrangement is comparable to the structural organisation of the AMNS.

In addition, Timor-Leste's Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta, headed by Ambassador Natércia Cipriano Coelho da Silva, was strengthened with the appointment of dedicated Economic and Socio-Cultural officials in October 2024 and subsequently declared "fully operational".¹⁵⁷ The presence of this Mission has been significant in accelerating the fulfilment of requirements for ASEAN accession, while also facilitating Timor-Leste's smooth integration into the bloc. Through these institutional improvements, Timor-Leste has demonstrated its readiness to assume the responsibilities of a full Member State.

Legal Readiness: Bridging the Regulatory Gap

Timor-Leste's progress in fulfilling the criteria as set in the *Roadmap*, introduced only in 2023, is nothing short of commendable. Nonetheless, the biggest challenge has arisen in the technical domain, particularly in aligning Timor-Leste's regulatory frameworks

with ASEAN's extensive treaty obligations, especially under the AEC. For Timor-Leste to become an ASEAN Member State, it was required to harmonise its domestic laws with regional standards and adopt a substantial body of legal instruments – a demanding task involving significant translation and legislative reform.¹⁵⁸ When a nation is faced with a significant undertaking, it becomes a question of whether it possesses the tenacity and determination to overcome it. In this regard, Timor-Leste demonstrated that it does.

Challenges of Accession

From the outset, Timor-Leste declared its willingness to accede to 66 agreements under the AEC "Priority One Accession" list, alongside 11 instruments under the ASEAN Political-Security Community Council (APSC) and 6 under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).¹⁵⁹ However, the reality of implementing these commitments proved more challenging than anticipated.

The challenges relating to legal frameworks were further complicated by the linguistic requirements to align with ASEAN's English-based systems, whereas Timor-Leste's legislative processes are conducted in Portuguese and Tetum. This necessitated a meticulous approach to translation and legal interpretation to ensure that domestic laws accurately reflected international obligations. Some observers perceived Timor-Leste's Portuguese-based legal system as a hindrance to ASEAN accession given the regional association's English-based framework.¹⁶⁰ However, ensuring that the nation has the capacity to not only ratify but also domestically enforce these legally binding international commitments is imperative to its successful integration into ASEAN.¹⁶¹

Mr Azril highlighted the sheer volume of work required to ensure Timor-Leste's legal readiness for ASEAN accession, particularly given the differences in linguistic traditions and legal systems. He noted that "For them, they have more work to be done because the legislation is in Portuguese. Therefore, they have to translate [the laws]."¹⁶² This translation requirement was not intended to impose a burden on Timor-Leste. Rather, it is motivated by the need to align a legal system rooted in Portuguese civil law with the legal traditions of ASEAN, whereby the legal instruments are in the English language.

Despite the enormous (others might describe it as troublesome) undertaking that was required for ASEAN membership, Ms Rangel characterised the process as "opportunities" for reform and improvement. Despite the challenges, the Timor-Leste Government has undertaken its obligations with positivity and efficiency:

*"We received the Roadmap in 2023, and over the span of two years, we are able to complete everything in terms of legal instruments. We have around... 87 legal instruments across the three different pillars... altogether, I can say we have fulfilled more than 65 of the current legal instruments under the Roadmap."*¹⁶³

We observed with admiration that the positive attitude of the Timorese leadership significantly contributed to fulfilment of most of the legal instruments required within two years. In our discussion with Ms Rangel, she shared that the Timorese Government prefers to view these challenges positively. She recognised that the rigorous period of legislative and structural reform was essential for integrating the nation into ASEAN's dynamic regional framework.¹⁶⁴

This is why Timor-Leste has worked tirelessly to ensure that its legal instruments align with ASEAN standards. Instead of viewing it as an additional hurdle to overcome, Ms Rangel saw it as a strategic necessity that would enhance the nation's ability to engage better with its neighbours and participate more effectively in the region's vast market. She further explained that by passing a significant volume of legislation through the National Parliament, the Timorese leadership would be able establish a compatible framework that will enable the nation to thrive within existing regional systems.¹⁶⁵

In addition, Timor-Leste had formally acceded to the *Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone* (SEANWFZ) during the 47th ASEAN Summit.¹⁶⁶ All these efforts demonstrate Timor-Leste's strong political will and determination to adhere to ASEAN's legal frameworks and security architecture.

Ms Rangel emphasised that the commitment to joining ASEAN has consistently remained a central priority on the Government's agenda. She noted that significant efforts have been dedicated to ensuring that laws and regulations are harmonised with ASEAN standards, thereby serving as a primary driver of legislative activity.

Furthermore, she pointed out that the country's recent accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) established a robust foundation, enabling the Government to better comply with ASEAN's specific requirements.¹⁶⁷

Although Timor-Leste is now officially the 11th ASEAN Member State, the nation must continue its ongoing efforts to harmonise its domestic laws with international standards. In this regard, the Timor-Leste Government has been unwavering in its efforts to adhere to said legal instruments, as reflected in the National Parliament's unanimous approval of 22 proposed resolutions.¹⁶⁸ This legislative momentum alongside ongoing reforms reflects the nation's strong commitment to aligning its domestic framework with international standards.

The Visa Exemption

Another example of a challenge that was turned into an opportunity is the specific legal requirement for visa-free travel. While the *Roadmap* mandates accession to the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Visa Exemption, issues arose due to Malaysia's own ratification status.

At present, Malaysia has not ratified the ASEAN visa-free agreement among ASEAN Member States. To overcome this initial setback, Timor-Leste adopted a strategy of bilateral negotiations, which culminated in the ratification of the Timor-Leste-Malaysia Visa Agreement. This agreement which came into effect on August 2025 allows Malaysians to enter Timor-Leste for 30 days without needing a visa.¹⁶⁹

During Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim's official visit to Timor-Leste in September 2025, a joint statement between both governments highlighted this pragmatic, bilateral arrangement "will facilitate easier and more frequent travel, boost tourism, enhance business and investment opportunities, foster greater people-to people exchanges between the two countries," as well as hasten the fulfilment of ASEAN criteria.¹⁷⁰

While our Malaysian Government had played a significant role in facilitating Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession on the grounds of regional solidarity and inclusivity, it must be remembered that the primary driver of this transition was the extraordinary

political will of the Timorese leadership. That said, insights gathered from all our interviews with key persons from Timor-Leste indicate that credit was unanimously given to Malaysia, as we had helped to significantly accelerate the accession process through strategic mentorship and targeted institutional support. Table 2 below summarises the key contributions made by Malaysia to ensure Timor-Leste possessed the necessary financial and technical infrastructure to take its place as the 11th member of the ASEAN family:

Table 2: Strategic Support Initiatives: Malaysia's Role in Timor-Leste's ASEAN Integration

Area of Support	Description of Contribution	Objective and Impact
Institutional Funding	200,000 USD in financial contribution	Funded the establishment of the Timor-Leste Unit at the ASEAN Secretariat to provide dedicated institutional support.
Technical Assistance	Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP)	Developed twelve tailored capacity building programmes aligned with Timor-Leste's development priorities.
Diplomatic Mentorship	Special Attachment Programme.	Implemented a programme for three batches of Timorese officers at Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to build expertise in both logistical and substantive aspects of ASEAN meetings.
Operational Guidance	Operationalisation of the Timor-Leste Unit	Enabled the unit to commence operations on 2 May 2025, assisting Timor-Leste in navigating complex legal instruments and frameworks.
Bilateral Connectivity	Visa Exemption Agreement	Facilitated travel and business exchanges, serving as a pragmatic step towards meeting broader ASEAN visa-free requirements.

Collaborative Support: Malaysia, Australia, and Partners

Malaysia has always been a steadfast partner to Timor-Leste in supporting its development and capacity building needs. While Malaysia was able to fully utilise the opportunities presented during our ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025 and create the needed momentum for Timor-Leste's accelerated acceptance into ASEAN, the success was dependent on the support of regional partners. Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar shared this sentiment, stating that the process of ASEAN accession was not incumbent on Timor-Leste alone. Rather, it required the collective action of all Member States. The coordinated efforts of ASEAN Member States are further strengthened with the support of Dialogue Partners, as well as Comprehensive Strategic Partners like Australia. Despite not being an ASEAN Member State, Australia's support has been instrumental in facilitating structural reforms, boosting economic opportunities, and increasing Timor-Leste's potential for development. Initiatives such as the "PROSIVU" programme were able to assist the Timor-Leste Government in navigating the technical requirements of both the WTO and ASEAN accession by placing technical advisors within key ministries.¹⁷¹

Malaysia has consistently worked with Australia, a strong development partner for Timor-Leste. Malaysia's technical expertise related to ASEAN processes coupled with Australia's resource capacity had greatly complemented efforts to advance Timor-Leste's development and accession to ASEAN. In evaluating the efficacy of regional partnerships, Mr Azril aptly described Australia as a steadfast and reliable collaborator, particularly regarding its efforts to address the linguistic challenges faced by Timorese officials. As the Deputy Director-General of APSCD, he was able to closely observe the benefits of Australia's proactive efforts in sponsoring English language initiatives. These programmes have been essential in ensuring that Timor-Leste's representatives are able to engage effectively within the English-based systems of ASEAN. Furthermore, Australia's diplomatic support has extended to facilitating regional coordination. This is reflected in Australia's willingness to provide logistical sponsorship for visiting delegations, which has gone far to strengthen the trilateral engagement between Malaysia, Australia, and Timor-Leste.

Dato' Amarjit Singh echoed this sentiment, noting the trusted partnership between the two nations. He observed that Australia's historical ties with the Timorese have contributed to the strong bond and the emergence of a substantial Timorese diaspora. Dato' Amarjit Singh also reflected that the best modality for our trilateral cooperation is based on a triangular modality, where Australia funds the programmes and Malaysia conducts it in Timor-Leste for the Timorese officials, which would make it more cost-effective for all governments involved.

Other partners have also contributed to Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN. For example, *The Progress Report on the Implementation of the Roadmap* documents contributions from Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) for translating ASEAN documents into Portuguese and Tetum, and ADB for conducting the Capacity Building Programme (CBP) Phase 2.¹⁷² As a Comprehensive Strategic Partner of ASEAN, Australia has also collaborated with Timor-Leste on many impactful initiatives, such as the Partnership for Human Development (PHD) for health and education, the Roads for Development (R4D) program, the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, the Timor-Leste Police Development Program (TLPDP), and the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP). Under the "New Partnership for a New Era" (*or Parseria Foun ba Era Foun* in Tetum) recently established by Prime Minister Gusmão and Prime Minister Albanese, we may expect to see further expansion and deepening of collaborative efforts between Australia and Timor-Leste. These are only some of the many initiatives that demonstrate the efficacy of regional support.¹⁷³ By strengthening foundational sectors such as health, infrastructure, and security, these collaborative efforts indirectly accelerate Timor-Leste's integration into ASEAN by ensuring that the state possesses the underlying institutional resilience and professional workforce capacity required to participate effectively in the regional bloc for the benefit of a shared future.

The road to full ASEAN membership for Timor-Leste will be remembered for the resilience of its people. All things considered, Timor-Leste has done remarkably well over the course of a few years, and the historic accession to ASEAN was greatly facilitated during Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025. This achievement stands

as a testament to our enduring bilateral ties and Malaysia's commitment to upholding the principle of inclusivity. By advancing Timor-Leste's cause and ensuring its smooth accession to ASEAN during the 47th ASEAN Summit, Malaysia played an integral role in completing the ASEAN family. This moment in Southeast Asian history was only made possible due to each Member State's equitable contributions to secure the development and prosperity for all.

That said, the collective effort to ease Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN cannot be understated. ASEAN Member States, with the support of Australia and other partners, were able to provide the necessary provision for targeted technical support needed to meet the requirements for Timor-Leste's inclusion. Timor-Leste is far from being a burden – in fact, it is a nation that has much to offer and share with the world, particularly lessons on forgiveness, reconciliation, and sustainable peace. As Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim stated during the 47th ASEAN Summit, the inclusion of Timor-Leste is evidence that the region's strength lies in its ability to embrace all its members, regardless of size or economic status. Timor-Leste's entry into ASEAN should not be viewed solely through the lens of development assistance. Rather, Timor-Leste's integration into the bloc is a strategic partnership which can help to realise the "Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic and People-Centred" aspirations of the *ASEAN Community Vision* into tangible regional outcomes.¹⁷⁴

Realising this vision of a dynamic and integrated region requires the formalisation of collaborative efforts between established partners who have already laid the foundations for Timor-Leste's institutional and economic growth. Evidence from our research and interviews indicates that Timor-Leste's development trajectory is significantly accelerated by the complementary initiatives of its regional neighbours. In particular, the sustained contributions of Malaysia and Australia offer a compelling model for effective bilateral engagement. Based on our findings, we have identified several priority areas for trilateral collaboration that may help to secure Timor-Leste's development in the future. We acknowledge that these suggestions may require considerable consultative sessions with the respective governments, and outline these in Table 3:

Table 3: Authors' Proposed Strategic Framework for Trilateral Development and Regional Integration in Timor-Leste

Development Pillar	Current Landscape & Shared Objectives	Collaborative Strengthening Strategies
Institutional Frameworks	Promoting administrative continuity and institutional memory during leadership transitions.	Enhancing Administrative Resilience: - Facilitate mentorship programmes to preserve technical expertise within the civil service. - Support the transition to a more permanent civil service to ensure institutional memory.
	Harmonising diverse legal traditions with regional ASEAN standards.	Regulatory Alignment: Sustain trilateral support for legislative translation and harmonisation to ensure seamless integration into the ASEAN community.
Capacity Building	Building a professional workforce to drive national development.	Human Capital Investment: Expand TVET to match labour skills with emerging industry needs.
	Bridging specialised skill gaps to meet the demands of a modern public administration.	Professionalisation: Leverage technical programmes (MTCP, MDCP, etc) to empower local leadership in defence and governance.

Development Pillar	Current Landscape & Shared Objectives	Collaborative Strengthening Strategies
Infrastructure & Connectivity	Enhancing regional integration through modernised transportation and digital connectivity. Achieving universal access to basic services such as clean water and sanitation.	Regional Connectivity: • Prioritise rural road connectivity. • Advance the expansion of port and airport facilities to foster tourism and trade efficiency. • Improve digital connectivity. Community Welfare: • Promote collaborative investment in the 2030 Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) targets to elevate public health standards. • Strengthen the quantity and quality of hospitals and healthcare service providers.
Economic Resilience	Transitioning towards a diversified, sustainable economy beyond the petroleum sector. Fostering a predictable environment for regional trade and private investment.	Economic Diversification: Jointly explore the potential of the “Blue Economy” and domestic petrochemical industries such as the Greater Sunrise Project. Market Integration: Utilise ASEAN membership as a catalyst for transparent business frameworks and expanded commercial opportunities.

Development Pillar	Current Landscape & Shared Objectives	Collaborative Strengthening Strategies
Human Security & Education	Cultivating an inclusive society where education serves as a tool for social mobility. Addressing nutritional foundations to ensure the long-term potential of the "youth bulge".	Inclusive Education: - Strengthen scholarship pipelines (Australia Awards, MTCP etc) to support and mentor the next generation of Timorese leaders. - Sustain trilateral cooperation in education and increase the number of scholarships given. For example, Australia could fund Timorese students to pursue studies at Australian Universities in Malaysia. Health Foundations: Sustain trilateral support for community-led health initiatives (For example, Kantina Matak) to ensure holistic physical and cognitive development for all.



Ms Milena Rangel, Timor-Leste's Vice Minister of ASEAN Affairs, played a pivotal role in addressing the challenges initially faced by the nation in meeting the requirements for ASEAN membership, contributing to Timor-Leste's successful inclusion on 26 October 2025.

Credit: fotoBERNAMA COPYRIGHT RESERVED.



Mr Azril Abd Aziz, Deputy Director-General of APSCD chaired the meeting of the ASEAN Senior Officials' Working Group on 10 November 2025 in Malaysia, to discuss the priorities to be addressed following Timor-Leste's admission into ASEAN.

Credit: Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, photographer Mohd Fadlie Shah.



One of the key initiatives under the MTCP, the Diplomatic Training Programme for Timor-Leste Officials, was organised by IDFR and co-sponsored by DFAT.

Credit: The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.



Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão warmly interacting with the volunteers of the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, which is reflective of his inclusive and approachable leadership style.

Credit: Dato Westmoreland Palon's personal collection.



Timor-Leste delegate Fransisca Maia is visibly overcome with emotion as her country celebrated a historic milestone, being admitted as ASEAN's 11th Member State during the 47th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC).

Credit: fotoBERNAMA COPYRIGHT RESERVED.



Credit: Foreign Minister of Malaysia's Office.



“Today, we celebrate you, a nation
built on courage, perseverance,
and unyielding hope, as you join
a family that has long awaited
your full inclusion.”

**The Honourable Dato’ Seri Utama
Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan,
Minister of Foreign Affairs,
Malaysia**

Remarks by the Foreign Minister at the Occasion of the
Deposit of the Instruments of Accession by Timor-Leste to
the Asean Charter and the SEANWFZ Treaty
on 25 October 2025.¹⁷⁵

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF TIMOR-LESTE INTO ASEAN

26 OCTOBER 2025

WALAPIM



Credit:
fotoBERNAMA
COPYRIGHT
RESERVED.



“Yesterday, at the signing of the Declaration of Accession, we witnessed a historic moment that will forever be remembered in the history of Timor-Leste and our region. On behalf of the Government and the people of Timor-Leste, I once again express our profound gratitude to the Government and people of Malaysia, to all ASEAN Member States for welcoming us into this great family.”

**Prime Minister of Timor-Leste,
H.E. Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão**

Opening remarks during the Signing of the Declaration on the Admission of Timor-Leste into ASEAN at the opening ceremony of the 47th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC) on 26 October 2025.¹⁷⁶



Credit: The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website.



“Australia recognises that Timor-Leste’s path to independence and sovereignty has been long and arduous. You rightly seek to make your own choices, without having them encroached by others. Timorese have struggled, through colonisation and occupation, to achieve what we all seek—our place in the world and the ability to decide our own future.”

**Senator the Honourable Penny Wong,
Minister for Foreign Affairs,
Australia**

Address to the Timor-Leste Ministry of Foreign Affairs and
Cooperation in Dili, Timor-Leste on 7 July 2023.¹⁷⁷

PART IV

Australia's Role *A Steadfast Partner*



Chapter 8:

Consolidating Peace: From World War II to Capacity Building

Timor-Leste owes its impressive transition from a conflict-stricken territory to a sovereign, democratic nation-state to the establishment of multiple security arrangements during its most vulnerable periods. Security forms the foundation of institutional development, sustainable economic growth, and social inclusivity. Conversely, the absence of security compromises the effective functioning of state mechanisms and the development of human capital. The enduring peace that Timor-Leste experiences today may also be attributed to the historically long-standing, at times nuanced, relationships with its neighbours. Among these neighbourly ties, the bilateral relations with Australia are unique in a sense that they have undergone various stages in order to culminate in their current form.

Bonded by Gratitude and Friendship: The Legacy of World War II and the *Criados*

Australia and Timor-Leste's security relationship was conceived long before the independence of the young nation, specifically during World War II. In 1942, following the Japanese invasion of Timor-Leste, Australian troops, primarily from the 2/2nd and 2/4th Independent Companies, undertook a strategic guerrilla campaign to stall the Japanese advance. But the fight was not fought alone. The *Criados* – Timorese youths and young boys – were constant companions to the Australian soldiers during this difficult period. They provided intelligence, food, shelter, and logistical support to the Australian soldiers, putting their lives at great risk in the process.

The consistent support provided by the *criados* proved indispensable to the success of the campaign. Due to the rugged and precarious interior of Timor-Leste, the likelihood of surviving the endless guerilla campaign would be low for the Australian army were it not for the generous help that the *criados* gave in the form of local

intelligence and safe networks of supplies. Senator Penny Wong, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Australia acknowledged that a deep bond was forged out of adversity, shared between Australian troops and the *criados*:

*"Together, we fought the battle for survival in the Second World War, when Timorese worked alongside nearly every Australian soldier; helping navigate, gathering intelligence, helping carry the wounded, securing food supplies... sharing common food and plate."*¹⁷⁸

Unfortunately, when the Australian soldiers formally departed Timor-Leste in 1943, the Timorese were left in the fates of the occupying Japanese troops. The Japanese occupation was unforgiving; approximately 40,000 to 60,000 Timorese lost their lives during the war, a disproportionately vast figure for a territory with a modest population.¹⁷⁹ The Australian soldiers were deeply saddened to depart and leave behind the friends they have made during a difficult time in their lives. Even though they had to return to Australia, the memories made and the bonds forged with the Timorese could not be erased. One such example is "Double Red" Veteran Ian Hampel, who even returned to Timor-Leste at the age of 95 to reunite with his *criados* – the individuals to whom he owed his life during the difficult mission in Timor-Leste.¹⁸⁰ This profound sense of indebtedness, often described as a "debt of honour" in recognition of the sacrifices made by the Timorese at the time has, in many ways, contributed to the positive civilian and diplomatic dynamics between the two countries ever since.

The Dare War Memorial

Mr Agio Pereira, Timor-Leste's Minister of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, described the protection and companionship that the Australian soldiers found with the locals during this painful period: "This sacrifice marked the start of a unique relationship – one that was not based on strategic interests, but on acts of courage, solidarity, and humanity from both sides."¹⁸¹

This legacy of partnership forged during World War II between Australia and Timor-Leste is immortalised at the Dare War Memorial. Perched on the hills of

Southern Dili, where most Australian troops, known as the "Sparrow Force", and their fellow *criados* once sought refuge, the memorial serves as a lasting testament to the collective wartime struggle of Australia and Timor-Leste. Beyond a wartime monument, the Dare War Memorial is ultimately a physical symbol of the lasting bond between Australians and Timorese.

Indeed, the shared struggle and wartime memory between the two neighbours remained a constant, continually rejuvenating bilateral relations. Today, relations at the grassroots and veteran levels are generally positive, which can be attributed to the earnest "debt of honour" among the Australian soldiers and warm feelings of the Timorese when they reflect on this genuine brotherhood.

The INTERFET Legacy

The 1999 referendum marked a pivotal turning point in Timor-Leste's security landscape at that time. Systematic violence and destruction by Timorese paramilitary forces, who received support from elements of the Indonesian army ensued. This resulted in a nationwide displacement crisis, during which hundreds of thousands of Timorese were forced to leave their homes in search of safety and protection as the scorched-earth policy was rolled out. Close to 70 percent of the country's infrastructure was destroyed as a result of the conflict.¹⁸²

Concerned by the increasingly dire humanitarian and security situation on the ground, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorised the deployment of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) to Timor-Leste. The peacekeeping mission was led by Australia under the command of then-Major General Peter Cosgrove. It was, at the time, Australia's largest overseas deployment of troops since the Vietnam War. The mission proceeded with a clearly defined mandate: to re-establish peace and security, protect, and assist the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), as well as enable the humanitarian relief efforts.¹⁸³

Many historians and scholars regard the arrival of INTERFET as a turning point in the history of Timor-Leste. It successfully put an end to the widespread violence

by establishing peace and security, which created conducive conditions for the statebuilding process in Timor-Leste. Emeritus Professor Maley noted the deep and lasting gratitude the Timorese have towards the Australian forces for their leadership of INTERFET. In our interview with him, he recalled how Timorese parents would name their children after INTERFET commanders — proof of the powerful, people-to-people connection between the two nations:

*"I know a young Timorese named Peter, whose father named him after Peter Cosgrove, the commanding officer. And I think that's a reflection of the extent to which ordinary Timorese felt that the Australian military had sort of squashed down the militia violence and the support that the militia had been getting from the TNI circles. It really put an end to that pretty quickly."*¹⁸⁴

However, the success of INTERFET did not come easily. Australia was forced to navigate complex diplomatic considerations in its engagement with Indonesia as it consolidated ground security across Timor-Leste. As order and security on the ground were swiftly secured, many displaced Timorese returned to their homes and the reconstruction of the country began. Although the Australia-led INTERFET had ended in 2000, it remains a forceful positive element in the unwavering bilateral relationship between the two neighbouring nations. This sentiment was echoed by Chief of the Timor-Leste Defence Forces, Lieutenant General Domingos Raul (also known as Falur Rate Laek), who described the intervention as "an act of faith in the self-determination of people; a commitment to humanity and a demonstration that international cooperation, when guided by just principles, can change the course of history."¹⁸⁵

The strong bonds that were established through the contributions of the courageous Australian troops in Timor-Leste helped to preserve the good relations between the two nations despite certain complexities often inherent in partnerships between nations of disparate economic and systemic scales. This dynamic has fostered a relationship that requires continuous, high-level dialogue to ensure mutual interests are balanced effectively.

Separating People from Politics

While the Timorese deeply honour the Australian-led military intervention, they remain cognisant of the complex diplomatic relationships. According to Emeritus Professor Maley, the Timorese do not hold the Australian people responsible for what they perceive to be the missteps of previous administrations. This capacity to view Australia, a powerful neighbouring country, in a separate lens of government policies by previous administrations compared to the care shown by common Australians, including the military personnel and aid workers, reflects a distinctive and nuanced perspective within Timor-Leste. In fact, the Timorese largely view the Australian military personnel in a positive light. Emeritus Professor Maley notes:

“One of the things that has struck me through the years, though, is that ordinary Timorese are more than capable in my experience of distinguishing between the contributions made by the Australian military and aid workers—people like that—on one hand, and Australian politicians on the other hand. Because people do still remember that for decades, Australia supported the Indonesian takeover.”¹⁸⁶

This compartmentalisation of people from politics amongst the Timorese is crucial to understanding how the security partnership between the countries have been sustained over the decades. This sentiment is echoed by Senator Penny Wong, Australia's Foreign Minister who used the term “reservoir of respect” to describe the outcome of the persistent face-to-face engagement between the Timorese public and the Australian security and aid personnel, which fostered mutual respect and trust compared to the high-level bilateral meetings alone.¹⁸⁷ Emeritus Professor Maley reinforces this perspective, saying: “There's very warm feelings towards the military and what they did and civilian aid workers who are very popular in Timor and the police.”¹⁸⁸

Continuing Police Cooperation

The contribution of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) has also played a significant role in achieving peace in Timor-Leste. Since the UNAMET mission in 1999, the AFP has continued to deploy police officers to all United Nations Missions established in Timor-Leste, including UNTAET, UNMISET, UNOTIL and support to the

International Stabilisation Force and UNMIT in 2006. To this day, the AFP continues to be a force in supporting Timor-Leste's policing needs and plays a crucial role in safeguarding civilians.

When the AFP officers were on their first deployment mission to Timor-Leste, they had to operate in very volatile and dangerous conditions. The courage demonstrated by these personnel formed the basis of the unwavering relationship, as Emeritus Professor Maley notes:

*"I think that's because they were working specifically with local Timorese counterparts who appreciated the vulnerability of the police who were unarmed under those circumstances and who often went far beyond what you would ever expect unarmed people could do in the face of extreme militia violence."*¹⁸⁹

To strengthen Timor-Leste's security capabilities for security autonomy and ensure sustainable peace in Timor-Leste, Australia introduced the Timor-Leste Police Development Program (TLPDP) in 2004, marking a shift away from its intervention-centric security model. Today, the relationship between the ADF and the F-FDTL has vastly matured, from its origins in the 1999 INTERFET operation to a partnership that emphasises training, education, and capacity building.

Timor-Leste Police Development Program (TLPDP)

Similar to the post-independence security support approach provided by Malaysia, Australia also extended their focus beyond peacekeeping to encompass capacity building. In this regard, the TLPDP was introduced to reinforce the Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste (PNTL), with a focus on investigations, training, governance, and gender equality. Since its establishment in 2004 under AFP leadership, the TLPDP has maintained a continuous presence which is now in Phase V of capacity development. TLPDP is jointly funded by DFAT and forms an integral part of Australia's development partnership with Timor-Leste. In 2025, TLPDP further extended targeted police development and transnational crime cooperation to the Scientific Police of Criminal Investigation. TLPDP is active in supporting the PNTL as the agency has applied for full membership into the multi-lateral policing forum of ASEANAPOL which is expected to occur in 2026.

The TLPDP symbolises a move from simply "doing" policing to "facilitating" policing. It seeks to create a professional, non-discriminatory local Timorese police force who do not only preserve law and order, but also place human rights at the heart of their responsibility. Apart from security collapse, the 2006 crisis had resulted in a clash between the police and the army. The introduction of TLPDP therefore was a timely means to address such conflict, as restoring trust in the PNTL and building its operational independence are fundamentally long-term endeavours.

Emeritus Professor Maley recounts the enduring affection that Timor-Leste continues to extend to AFP officers, as evidenced by the decorations conferred upon them by President Ramos-Horta during the 25th anniversary celebrations of the Popular Consultation. The gesture reflects the success of Australia's "police diplomacy" approach in which bonds are built on mutual professional respect and collective risks.¹⁹⁰

Integrating Inclusivity in the TLPDP

A contemporary security partnership with Timor-Leste is incomplete without advancement in gender equality. In this respect, the TLPDP has actively promoted women's participation in the PNTL while simultaneously trying to tackle the issue of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). For example, under the TLPDP, a gender audit and leadership training programme for female officers of the PNTL was conducted in 2022. In 2026, the Government of Timor-Leste appointed Ms Natércia Eufrásia Soares Martins as the first-ever woman Second Commander General Assistant Commissioner, a testament to the success of the TLPDP's long-term investment and focus on inclusivity. In addition, to furnish the Timorese police force to better serve certain segments of populations that are most likely at risk, customised training in sexual assault and child abuse investigations was also organised.¹⁹¹ The initiatives crucially correspond to the wider development aims of promoting inclusivity in the security sector. When the security sector represents the population it serves, this allows them to better respond to crimes specifically and disproportionately impacting women and children, in turn creating a more secure and equitable society.

Maritime Security and Sovereignty

For a littoral state such as Timor-Leste, the capacity to protect its waters is fundamental to its sovereignty and economic security. Among the most pressing security challenges beleaguering the country include illegal fishing, transnational crime, and border security vulnerabilities. In response, Australia has supported Timor-Leste's maritime policing and defence capabilities through the DCP and Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP). The DCP with Timor-Leste prioritises technical and operational development, spanning maritime security, infantry tactics, and engineering. It further supports institutional capacity through training in strategic policy, governance, finance, and specialised English language and communications skills. This commitment is reflected in the DCP's deployment of 24 in-country advisors, comprising 21 Australian army personnel based in Dili and Metinaro, two Royal Australian Navy personnel at Port Hera, and an Australian Public Service advisor. The deployment was for the purpose of mentoring, infrastructure development, participation in ADF exercises and training, and direct service-to-service training.¹⁹²

The PMSP also offers comprehensive assistance through "capability, infrastructure, sustainment, training, and coordination designed to increase national and regional maritime security."¹⁹³ For instance, under the PMSP, Australia committed to gifting two Austal-built Guardian-class patrol boats to support Timor-Leste's efforts in addressing illegal fishing and managing its exclusive economic zone.¹⁹⁴ Although these vessels have yet to be accepted by Timor-Leste pending infrastructure upgrades at the Port Hera Naval base,¹⁹⁵ this effort is nevertheless a strong example of Australia's enhanced defence cooperation with Timor-Leste, which would strengthen the response to shared regional security challenges. Overall, Australia's security assistance is a significant investment in Timor-Leste's capability to exert independent authority over its maritime resources and borders. At the same time, it also symbolises an evolving bilateral dynamic between Australia and Timor-Leste, shifting from a relationship of dependency during the INTERFET period to one grounded in partnership between two sovereign states.

Defence Cooperation Program (DCP)

The Defence Cooperation Program (DCP) is a parallel security support programme that was conceived to coordinate the partnership of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and the F-FDTL. The programme is intended to facilitate the F-FDTL development by focusing on military training, consultation, and facilities assistance. The DCP is a multifaceted programme and has been in operation since 2001. One of the DCP's aims is to strengthen Timor-Leste's security infrastructure and overall capability. On this note, Australia funded the Metinaro Training Base which is the core professional development facility for F-FDTL officers.¹⁹⁶

Beyond strengthening security infrastructure, the DCP seeks to enhance the defence forces' knowledge on maritime security, engineering, logistics, infantry skills, and English language proficiency.¹⁹⁷ In this regard, a mastery of the English language is crucial for F-FDTL officers because it guarantees them a brighter future for advanced military education at some of the most renowned institutions, such as the Royal Military College Duntroon in Australia.¹⁹⁸ At the same time, English proficiency is also needed for participation in joint interoperability missions with other nations but most crucially, for Timor-Leste's participation in regional bodies like ASEAN. The DCP, therefore, plays a critical role in addressing this linguistic requirement, with its English language training programme forming a foundational pillar of the programme.

Capacity Building for Timorese Security Personnel

Beyond formal training and infrastructure development, the maturing defence relationship also prioritises joint operational exercises that translate technical skills into shared field experience and mutual trust. Australian soldiers and the F-FDTL continue to strengthen their relationship through activities like *Hari'i Hamutuk* (Tetum for "building together"), which is a multilateral training exercise conducted across Timor-Leste, supported by Australia and other countries such as New Zealand, the United States and Japan. This initiative contributes to upgrading local infrastructure and providing specialised training in engineering and emergency management while building strong bonds with personnel from the Timorese defence force.¹⁹⁹

The maturation of F-FDTL is recognised by Brigadier Malcolm Wells, who headed the Australian personnel, and said “I am impressed by how much the F-FDTL has grown since I was first here in 2001 into the sophisticated force it is today.”²⁰⁰ These approaches were employed to fundamentally create interoperability of Timorese security personnel while preserving the personal relationships that ensure fruitful cooperation during times of crisis.

Australia’s role in securing and preserving peace in Timor-Leste has been a long and laborious process, beginning in the rural mountains during World War II to leading peacekeeping operations during the restoration of independence in the late ‘90s. Currently, the security cooperation between the two neighbours has evolved into a model of institutional collaboration, focused on building the capacity of local forces to respond and serve their respective populations in the best manner. Despite the high-level political relationship between the two neighbours being complicated in the past, the people-to-people and institution-to-institution connection have remained strong and helps to explain the continuous effort to strengthen bilateral relations between Australia and Timor-Leste.

Inclusivity in Current Training Modules for Timorese Security Personnel

Today, the bilateral capacity building bond between Australia and Timor-Leste has become one that is also geared towards transferring multifaceted skills and integrating the spirit of inclusivity. The yearly IPE activities and the *Hari’i Hamutuk* multilateral engineering engagements are key examples of this shift in focus in the bilateral capacity building approach. Beyond learning the basics of soldiering, the module also now focuses on gender inclusivity and intricate logistics as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

In particular, the emphasis on gender inclusivity in the current DCP module vastly reflects the influence of the UN’s Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, which emphasises the vital role that women play in conflict prevention and resolution, as well as in peacebuilding efforts.²⁰¹ In this regard, the DCP seeks to implement the Gender, Peace, and Security (GPS) perspective, aimed at enhancing women’s participation in the defence and security sector. Lieutenant Commander Lisa Steel, who leads the

GPS team, observed that women were “pivotal in the nation’s push for independence”. Commander Steel also noted the joyful experience that the ADF found in working alongside their F-FDTL counterparts, to “achieve greater representation and leadership positions in their nation’s defence force.”²⁰²

Some of the programmes curated to encourage the sharing of experiences and skills amongst the female troops include “women’s walks” and workshops.²⁰³ The growing diversity of officers cultivated through these initiatives is echoed by Brigadier Jennifer Harris, Commander of the Indo-Pacific Endeavour:

“I have seen first-hand how tough change can be, but it is networks like these that have been critical to my journey. [...] Diverse teams are better at solving complex problems... This can mean the difference between success and failure.”²⁰⁴

Australia recognises that being a steadfast partner to Timor-Leste first and foremost requires listening to its aspirations with the genuine desire to understand their needs. This is reflected in the “country-owned, country-led” approach adopted by Australia for Timor-Leste, which stresses the need to *facilitate rather than dictate* the development trajectory of its northern neighbour. In the context of defence and security, this approach empowers the F-FDTL to take ownership of its institutional and operational capabilities as a sovereign nation.

From our findings, we conclude that the security architecture of Timor-Leste reflects a holistic approach that integrates international institutional support with grassroots reconciliation. From the “debt of honour” formed during World War II to the subsequent INTERFET intervention, Timor-Leste’s bilateral relationship with Australia has successfully transitioned from emergency stabilisation to a holistic partnership centred on capacity building and gender-inclusive professionalism.

Ultimately, the shift from dependency to interoperability underscores a shared commitment to enhancing Timorese autonomy. The “reservoir of respect” between the people of these two nations is sustained through persistent and genuine institutional cooperation, which acts as a stabilising force in the relationship. As Timor-Leste moves towards greater regional integration, this enduring partnership remains a vital cornerstone of its trajectory towards a resilient, self-reliant, and peaceful future.



Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, who was the President of Timor-Leste at the time, the President Ramos-Horta, who was then Timor-Leste's first Foreign Minister, with Kevin Rudd MP.

Credit: National Archives of Australia.

58TH ASEAN FOREIGN MINISTERS' MEETING AND RELATED MEETINGS KUALA LUMPUR, 8 - 11 JULY 2025



Senator Penny Wong, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, meets with Mr Bendito dos Santos Freitas, Timor-Leste Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, on the sidelines of the ASEAN-Australia Foreign Ministers' Meeting, East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting and the ASEAN Regional Forum in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 10-11 July 2025.

Credit: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website.



Credit: Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

“ We recognise that for generations, the people of this nation have endured immense struggles in pursuit of their political and economic independence. Many have fought to assert their right to determine their own future path – one that is defined by hope and growth. Australia – as both a security and a development partner – will always honour that independence, and seek to bolster and protect Timorese sovereignty. Because we recognise that the progress of our region – of our peoples – can only be fully realised when we prioritise cooperation. ”

**The Honourable Anthony Albanese MP,
Prime Minister of Australia**

Address to the National Parliament of Timor-Leste
on 28 January 2026.²⁰⁵

Chapter 9: Major Development Partner

1: Empowering Timor-Leste's Democratic Pillars: Civil Society and the Grassroots

As one of the world's youngest democracies, Timor-Leste's post-independence development has been coloured by the resilience and strength of its vibrant civil society and grassroots framework. The nation-building process in Timor-Leste necessitates active and collaborative engagement among key vital grassroots stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local movements, as well as locally-based international partners.

These stakeholders serve as a link between the Government and the rural communities, which effectively narrows governance gaps. This collective effort is sustained by a dual focus on advancing human capital through several focus areas such as healthcare, gender equality, capacity-building, and education by collaborating with international partnerships to promote peace and development. Ultimately, these grassroots stakeholders act as a significant driver of inclusivity. This ensures that the nation's peace and development are felt by people across the socio-economic strata.

Both Malaysia and Australia play a harmonising role in Timor-Leste's nation-building journey. As previously discussed, Malaysia has been at the forefront of facilitating Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession journey, providing much-needed technical support. Australia's contribution has also facilitated Timor-Leste's accession to the bloc. In this chapter, we focus more on Australia's role as a major development partner to Timor-Leste. This bilateral partnership is rooted in holistic and persistent support in development partnership – guided by the Timorese Government's own development agenda.

The “Country-Owned, Country-Led” Principle

Since the restoration of Timor-Leste’s independence in 2002, the international aid doctrine for the country has vastly progressed; from one that responds spontaneously to provide emergency humanitarian aid and stabilisation, to one that is underpinned by the “country-owned” and “country-led” model.

With the influx of international development assistance, the Government of Timor-Leste has recognised the imperative and strategic necessity of exercising greater autonomy over the framework and distribution of financial support. With this in mind, the Timorese Government has been a vocal spokesperson for the “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States”, championed by the g7+ group, an intergovernmental organisation of 20 former conflict-affected countries in which Timor-Leste is a prominent member. This principle is rooted in the idea that development priorities should be defined and driven by the implementing country rather than be dictated by countries who are resource partners.²⁰⁶ Australia has aligned its development assistance with this overarching principle of common respect and a spirit of inclusivity for Timor-Leste’s development autonomy.

Australia believes that without development, there can never be real security. And this development cannot be sustained without incorporating the “country-owned, country-led” principle, which embodies the spirit of inclusivity as reflected in the effectiveness of Australia’s development architecture in Timor-Leste. In this context, we would like to refer to the definition as provided in the *DFAT Guidance Note: Locally Led Development*:

“Locally Led Development Cooperation: Sustainable and effective development co-operation that supports locally led development by respecting and enabling the agency, leadership and decision making of diverse local actors in framing, design, delivery, resourcing and accountability, in given local and operating contexts.”²⁰⁷

For locally-led development to be effective, it must be inclusive of the target group it seeks to serve. "Inclusivity" is a term that governments around the world use widely, but is difficult to truly implement. In this regard, we have observed that Australia has genuinely listened to the needs and priorities of everyday Timorese. This is done through the facilitation of locally-led development for the betterment of Timor-Leste and its people, rather than merely advancing Australia's strategic interests.

The commitment to upholding this principle is evident in the regular consultation processes held with all the stakeholders of Timorese society. For example, the *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan (2025-2030)* was developed by gathering insights from meetings with over 90 government officials and workshops involving more than 170 diverse local stakeholders.²⁰⁸ This allowed Australia to integrate views from Timor-Leste's leadership alongside extensive input from civil society, community leaders, and development partners from high-level government bureaucrats to leaders of the civil society and the grassroots sector.

The *Development Partnership Plan (DPP)* is significant because it sets out agreed objectives between Timor-Leste and Australia – hallmarks of an inclusive development partnership – and details how the two countries will work together to deliver shared outcomes.²⁰⁹ The primary objective of the Australia – Timor-Leste development partnership is to cultivate a secure, thriving, and resilient Timor-Leste. To realise this vision, the *DPP (2025-2030)* is strategically concentrated across four fundamental pillars as reflected in the table below:

Table 4: Joint objectives and focus areas of the Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan (DPP) 2025-2030²¹⁰

Objectives	Focus Areas
1. Quality services	• Public financial management • Civil society • Health • Basic and inclusive education
2. Inclusive and sustainable economic growth	• Infrastructure and connectivity • Private sector development • Labour mobility • Skills development • Scholarships • Women's economic empowerment
3. A sovereign, stable, and resilient nation	• Disaster preparedness and community resilience • ASEAN & WTO • Cybersecurity • Border and biosecurity • Police and defence cooperation
4. All people thrive and prosper	• Prevention of and response to violence against women, children, and people with disability • Disability equity • Civil society

The DPP model allows for a development design that is focused on the implementing partner, rather than imposing a development agenda that may not accurately reflect the actual priorities of the Timorese. The inclusive spirit of the “country-led, country-owned” principle is further strengthened with the increased number of Timorese senior consultants leading Australia’s development model and related initiatives in the country. This ensures the projection of local context in the overall aid architecture and the effective implementation of social and economic policies.²¹¹

As the leading bilateral development partner to Timor-Leste, Australia has provided extensive support that has had a significant impact on the Timorese population. According to DFAT, Australia provided 124.4 million AUD in total Official Development Assistance (ODA) from July 2024 to June 2025 alone, with a projected estimate of 135.9 million AUD total ODA from July 2025 to June 2026. In addition, the methods of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) frameworks within locally-led development programmes has also helped to ensure that initiatives meet the intended objectives, and can be improved to fit the changing needs of Timorese society. Taking into account the comprehensive nature of the Australia and Timor-Leste development partnership, we are unable to document the entirety of this support. That said, we highlight some important aspects that have helped to improve the quality of life for all Timorese.

Australian Aid: Supporting the Healthcare System

As an emerging economy, it is understandable that Timor-Leste faces challenges within its health system, with high rates of malnutrition and maternal mortality – issues acknowledged by the Timor-Leste leaders and officials whom we interviewed. In fact, the *Tatoli! 2025 Survey* indicates that health security has become the top most concern for most Timorese, more so than the condition of Timor-Leste's infrastructure. While 76 percent of the respondents also said they do have access to a health clinic, they hope for an increase in the quality of the services provided.²¹²

Dr Kent shared that during her visit to Timor-Leste in July 2025, she observed the disparity in healthcare access, as those with the financial means were able to seek medical treatment abroad.²¹³ Unfortunately, this option is not one that most Timorese can afford, which results in the pressing need for widespread access to domestic healthcare. She also highlighted specific logistical challenges, such as shortages of basic medications like paracetamol. The scarcity of basic medication like paracetamol indicates gaps in other aspects of the healthcare system, such as logistics, procurement, and supply chain management.

Nevertheless, the Timor-Leste Government recognises the current situation and has made it a priority to improve the healthcare system for all Timorese. This led to the strategic allocation of state resources in ways that would best benefit the community's welfare. For example, Mr Lisualdo Gaspar shared that the Timorese Government has intensified building and renovation efforts of more hospitals to increase the people's access to this crucial service.

The effort to improve the socio-economic realities of Timorese, which includes strengthening its healthcare system, is very much an ongoing national effort. Ms Milena Maria da Costa Rangel noted that while the country has made significant progress, the development of human capital — specifically in the sectors of health and education — remains a critical priority for the state.²¹⁴ Hence, enhancing access to and increasing the quality of public health services remain as core objectives for sustainable development.

Ms Rangel emphasised that education and healthcare remain the two most critical sectors for Timor-Leste's ongoing development. While noting that bilateral cooperation with Malaysia is active in these areas, she shared that the bilateral cooperation with Australia has also provided continuous support to these essential services. Ms Rangel's remark highlights the importance of strategic support by international partners for the growth of human capital and civil society in Timor-Leste.

In this regard, Australia has continued to provide crucial support to Timor-Leste's health sector. Among the ways this is done are by upgrading the accessibility and quality of services, investing in the sustainable and long-term enhancement of nutrition programmes, maternal healthcare, and infectious disease mechanisms.²¹⁵ According to the Lowy Institute's Southeast Asia Aid Map, Australia's support accounts for one-quarter of the ODF to Timor-Leste from 2015 to 2023.²¹⁶ The sizeable aid focuses on critical areas such as human development, health, and gender equality. In addition, the *DPP* (2025-2030) also explains the Australian Government's commitment to support Timor-Leste's health sector. The DPP aims to strengthen the healthcare system at the national, municipal, and facility levels by enhancing the quality and accessibility of essential services. This includes reproductive health as well as maternal

and child health. Furthermore, the Australian Government intends to pilot innovative performance-based financing initiatives that align with the Government of Timor-Leste's mission to elevate community-level care.

We are able to observe that when it comes to providing assistance to development partners, Australia is forward thinking – planning for sustainable initiatives that can be enjoyed in the years to come. For example, the Australia Timor-Leste Partnership for Human Development (PHD) is a decade-long initiative committed to enhancing the welfare of the Timorese people and empowering them to drive national progress.²¹⁷ Through the PHD, the Australian Government focuses on fortifying institutional systems to provide quality primary healthcare and foundational education while championing gender equality and disability inclusion. To continue this commitment, the Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (Media release, 2026) announced a new Human Development Initiative (HDI) in January 2026 amounting to 220 million AUD with the aim of supporting the delivery of inclusive and high-quality health, education, and disability services across Timor-Leste.²¹⁸ The vastness of Australia's support in this area cannot be denied. Although we are not able to capture the entirety of their development assistance, some notable examples are highlighted throughout this chapter.

Vaccine Support

According to a 2023 Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) survey, approximately eight to nine percent of Timorese children, mostly those in the rural areas, are categorised as "zero dose," meaning they have not received regular vaccination.²¹⁹ At present, the developing medical infrastructure available to the ordinary Timorese faces significant fiscal limitations, which leads to many challenges, such as their access to vaccines and other healthcare services.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the vulnerability of the Timorese healthcare system. As the country struggled to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, the Australian Government provided much-needed access to life-saving vaccines, a contribution that further strengthened the bilateral relationship between the two countries amidst testing times. A Timorese diplomat, Mr Loro Horta noted:

“Without diminishing the merits of the Timorese authorities, things would have been much worse without Australian support. Despite being hit hard by the pandemic, Australia has donated over 900,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines. Thanks in part to Australian help, Timor Leste now has one of the highest vaccination rates in the developing world.”²²⁰

Beyond supplying vital vaccines, Australia also extended support in providing medical supplies and personal protective equipment for healthcare workers.²²¹ In addition, the deployment of the Australian Medical Assistance Team (AUSMAT) to Timor-Leste at the height of the pandemic was important in helping to tackle the sharp rise of COVID-19 cases by working together with Timorese healthcare workers to care for COVID-19 patients.²²² Other efforts included the provision of technical expertise by Australian doctors from the Menzies School of Health Research based in Darwin, Australia, who arrived in Timor-Leste to support the development of testing procedures that were crucial in containing the spread of the virus.²²³

The assistance given by Australia during a time of critical need demonstrates a bilateral partnership that goes beyond strategic interests alone, but also heavily driven by a genuine gesture of goodwill. This support continues post-pandemic. It is reported that 99 percent of young girls between 11-14 years have received the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine in 2024 under the PHD, support which amounts to 120 million AUD.²²⁴ While the provision of life-saving vaccines addressed immediate health vulnerabilities, Australia also recognised that sustainable health outcomes are also dependent on tackling the issue of nutritional deficiencies that underpin the nation's stunting rates.

Nutrition Aid

With approximately half of its children below the age of five experiencing stunted growth, Timor-Leste has one of the world's highest stunting rates.²²⁵ In fact, according to UNICEF, one in 24 Timorese children will not live to see their fifth birthday due to the combined effects of stunting and wasting. This is a strong indication of the relationship between the state of children's health and food security in Timor-Leste.

Cognisant of the severity of this issue and its implications for the nation's development trajectory, the *Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030* is a tangible expression of commitment by the Timor-Leste Government towards crucially reducing the stunting rate among children. This is why the Timorese Government has greatly invested in early childhood health.²²⁶ This is reflected in many efforts, such as those spearheaded by Timor-Leste's Vice Prime Minister, Mr Mariano Assanami Sabino. For example, an MoU was signed between the Timor-Leste Government and UNICEF, which aimed to "provide technical assistance and support to the Inter-Ministerial Task Force for Social Affairs to address cross-cutting challenges in the areas that are relevant to human capital development, such as early childhood development, nutrition and food security, and youth empowerment."²²⁷

In addition, the Timor-Leste Government had recently launched *The Holistic Agriculture, Food and Nutrition (HAFOUN) Report* in October 2025.²²⁸ This report was carefully produced through an extensive stakeholder consultation, which identified nine high-return interventions to bolster food security and livelihoods in Timor-Leste. The impartial cost-benefit analysis highlighted in the report underscores the necessity of investing in agriculture-and nutrition-sensitive social protection to break the cycle of poverty. More importantly, the *HAFOUN Report* is a tangible effort that provides a useful roadmap for scaling up programmes that increase farmer incomes and drive long-term sustainable development across the country.²²⁹ While the fruits from these efforts may only be seen in the coming years, the impact of a systems-level transformation of how food is produced, distributed, and consumed in Timor-Leste is hoped to reduce malnutrition and increase food security, as well as address many other related issues.

We observe that in Timor-Leste, a whole-of-society approach is used to support nutrition aid and improve the overall health for Timorese. Commendable efforts are seen from the leadership all the way to grassroots levels, with the help of international partners as well. One such example is the Green Canteen (Kantina Matak), located on the President's palace grounds, which has provided nutritious daily meals for the most impoverished sections of the population – particularly children, pregnant women, young and/or single mothers. The programme, which was first conceived in 2022, has

received widespread support and cooperation from the diplomatic community, with generous contributions from different embassies and governments such as Malaysia, Australia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Japan.

In addition, the Australian Government supported this programme through regular engagement activities spearheaded by the ADF, reflecting the intertwining of humanitarian relief and military cooperation. For example, in October 2025, ADF troops, who were part of the exercise *Hari'i Hamutuk* (Build Together), took a rare break from construction and engineering works to prepare barbecues – something Aussies know best – for more than 500 children at Kantina Matak. Ms Bella Galhos, one of the founders of Kantina Matak spoke about the tangible impacts that such a programme left:

*"Nutritious meals are so important to overcome issues such as stunted growth and impacted learning for children... Things like beef, burgers, they are very costly, and it's very exciting for the children to have an opportunity to try a traditional Australian barbeque, with real Australian soldiers."*²³⁰

Ms Galhos underscored the communal significance of the kitchen, noting that "Kantina Matak is not just a simple kitchen, it's a community, and a place for the President to connect with his people."²³¹

Indeed, education and productivity are closely linked to access to health and nutrition security. In this regard, Kantina Matak symbolises a tangible, local expression of a common cause championed by both Timor-Leste and Australia. It also serves to sustainably break the cycle of poverty in Timor-Leste.

From our observation, the future of Timor-Leste's stability rests upon a successful synergy between high-level state governance and its grassroots population. By emphasising the "country-owned, country-led" model, the partnership with Australia extended beyond financial provision. Instead, it helped to bridge critical governance gaps in health, education, and gender equality. In our opinion, one of the contributing factors to the success of initiatives supported by Australia's development assistance

may be the monitoring systems developed mentioned in the *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan (2025-2030)*. This monitoring system provides much-needed data to improve the quality of assistance offered and ensure the desired outcomes are achieved. For example, Australia is able to keep abreast of statistical improvements in community health centres through its Performance Assessment Framework, which provides a list of indicators that suggest the expected results are being met.

By ensuring that essential health and nutrition services are measurable and data-driven, Australia's development assistance is better utilised to address the structural inequalities that often underpin poor health outcomes. That said, the commitment to strengthening healthcare systems and providing better nutrition for all extends beyond physical well-being. We opine that this may be the reason why Australia's development partnership with Timor-Leste also aims to improve gender equality as stated in the *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan (2025-2030)*.

Gender Equality

Australian development assistance also focuses on addressing gender inequalities by empowering women, who are among the most vulnerable population of society. These efforts are guided by Australia's Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Strategy in Timor-Leste – a strategy which articulates how Australia will intensify gender equality and disability inclusion across political engagement, development and economic programmes. The four thematic focus areas of the GEDSI are outlined in the table below:

Table 5: GEDSI Thematic Focus Areas²³²

Focus Area	Rationale	Key Commitments & Actions
Inclusive Leadership	Diverse leadership, especially of women and people with disability, is viewed as a critical driver for social change.	• Establish targeted initiatives to support leadership for women and people with disabilities. • Commit to supporting diverse leadership across all activities.
Civil Society Engagement	Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a primary role in promoting equality and inclusion within Timorese society.	• Increase support specifically for women's CSOs and organisations of persons with disability. • Proactively engage with civil society across the full breadth of operations.
Safety and Ending Violence	Responds to high rates of violence against women, children, people with disabilities, and other marginalised communities.	• Integrate robust safeguarding and PSEAH (Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment) approaches. • Ensure internal workplaces are safe and respectful with appropriate policies. • Share Australia's experiences while learning from Timor-Leste's context.
Preconditions for Disability Inclusion	Recognises that full and meaningful participation requires specific settings to be in place, which ultimately makes society more inclusive for everyone.	• Focus on improving physical and digital accessibility. • Increase access to assistive technology and support services. • Promote non-discrimination across the breadth of Australia's footprint.

The emphasis on promoting gender equality is also reflected in Australia's PHD. Specifically, the document explains how Australia supports gender equality. One of the ways this is done is by ensuring women and girls are more empowered, with access to improved services. Approximately 0.8 million AUD each year is invested for this cause, with an additional of up to 4 million AUD each year for the Eliminating Violence Against Women Program through a grant to The Asia Foundation (TAF). As at the time of the publication of the PHD, the current partners to achieve this goal are TAF, local and international CSOs, Government of Timor-Leste leaders, as well as relevant Ministries.²³³

The development support for gender equality often intersects with the issue of health due to the high level of maternal mortality rates and GBV in Timor-Leste. To address this problem, significant contributions have been made to local organisations and programmes such as Nabilan. The Nabilan programme is a partnership between the Australian and Timor-Leste Government to end violence against women and children in Timor-Leste. Throughout 2023-2024, it is reported that through Nabilan, 16,711 services were provided to women and children who have experienced violence amounting to 20.5 million AUD.²³⁴

In summary, we are able to observe that Australia's assistance through long-term development frameworks are defined by Timorese priorities. This "country-led" approach ensures that progress in human capital is sustainable and managed by local leadership – ensuring that the nation's development is driven by the agency of the Timorese people. By integrating high-level technical assistance with community-based programmes in areas such as health, nutrition, and gender equality, Australia addresses both immediate needs and systemic gaps. Now that Timor-Leste has become an ASEAN Member State, this partnership remains an important component of the nation's institutional resilience and regional stability.



Australian members of INTERFET talk to the Timorese in Dili, 12 February 2000.

Credit: NAVY File by PH3 Dan Memuto.



The Honourable John Howard MP, Australia's former Prime Minister, visiting Timor-Leste.

Credit: National Archives of Australia, photographer Peter West.

2: Capacity Building: Developing Timor-Leste's Human Capital

A nation-building process is essentially rooted in the empowerment of its most valuable resource: human capital. As a nation born from the ashes of unrest and occupation in 1999, Timor-Leste was met with a critically urgent challenge: the lack of skilled labour and institutional capacity. The Timorese leadership faced a formidable challenge: what would be the most effective way to ease the pathway for all Timorese into a productive and professional workforce in order to build and sustain the country's development, particularly in its economic diversification efforts? Addressing this challenge requires a capacity building model that goes beyond skills training. It must, more importantly, translate into tangible outcomes, including strengthened economic resilience, enhanced labour mobility, and the grooming of credible future leaders.

The Human Resource Crisis

A major impediment to economic diversification and poverty reduction is the lack of skilled human capital. The workforce is characterised by educational disparities and a mismatch between skills and market needs. This skills gap is acknowledged at the highest levels of the Timorese Government. The *Strategic Development Plan* states that "Timor-Leste currently faces critical human resource constraints across most areas of our economy, as well as in government administration."²³⁵

If the current situation continues, it may result in increased unemployment rates, which would disproportionately affect Timorese youth. Timor-Leste has one of the youngest populations in the world, with a median age of 20.8 years.²³⁶ This "youth bulge" has the potential to become a demographic dividend, but in the absence of a robust private sector, it risks becoming a source of job insecurity and potential instability.

The *Tatoli! 2025 Survey* identifies scarcity of jobs as the single most significant challenge faced by young people, cited by 70 percent of respondents.²³⁷ This surge in employment-related concerns underscores the urgent need for improvements in both the economic and educational sectors. In the following section, we attempt to highlight some of the many forms of Australian support to help address the skills gap in partnership with Timor-Leste.

PALM: Building Economic Resilience

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is one of the significant initiatives within the bilateral partnership, primarily designed to empower Timorese citizens through international work experience and human capital development. The programme serves as one of the means for Timorese workers to achieve financial autonomy, gain skills, and support their families through substantial savings. This initiative prioritises the long-term economic security of participants by facilitating access to formal qualifications and technical upskilling. When these workers return to Timor-Leste, they will possess the professional expertise needed to strengthen the nation's priority sectors.

The programme delivers mutual benefits to both Timor-Leste and Australia, as remittances sent home by Timorese workers improve their family's living standard in Timor-Leste. In addition, the issue of workforce deficit for many Australian businesses is also addressed. This is what contributes to such a strong and mutually beneficial bilateral partnership. Many of these Timorese workers also gain beneficial skills through their work experience in Australia – something that may be more difficult to attain back home due to the lack of opportunities available. The PALM programme is thus designed to build true economic resilience in Timor-Leste, as the income brought home through remittances channels money directly to ordinary Timorese. In turn, this helps them to build houses, send their siblings to schools, and fund local celebrations like weddings – all of which ultimately build the society's economic security and resilience. This is in contrast to the top down big infrastructure projects or oil revenues in which economic effects are harder to gauge.²³⁸

Unfortunately, the programme may result in a significant loss of labour for an emerging economy like Timor-Leste, which relies heavily on its human resources for sustainable development. Being well-aware of this problem, the Australian Government has acted with foresight by connecting the training of Timorese workers with priority sectors in Timor-Leste. This facilitates "more than 1,000 PALM scheme workers to attain formal qualifications over 4 years"²³⁹ and allows the returning Timorese workers to contribute in building Timor-Leste's economic security and resilience.

TVET as a Pathway to Growth

While the PALM scheme provides essential opportunities for Timorese workers to gain skills abroad, Australia is simultaneously investing in the country's internal capacity by strengthening the technical and vocational education systems required to sustain a modern domestic workforce. This institutional investment aligns with Timor-Leste's own national drive to increase the quality of domestic jobs and upskill an expanding population.²⁴⁰ While returning workers provide an immediate boost to economic security, long-term resilience can be achieved through other means, such as the development of a robust Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) framework capable of harnessing the potential of the nation's burgeoning youth population. Acknowledging this reality, TVET has been incorporated into Timor-Leste's capacity building approach to align the requirements of a modernising nation with the realities of the rural population's dependence on a subsistence economy.

The Australian Government has always placed high emphasis on investment in human capital and vocational education. This is reflected in the approach to addressing the intersection of high unemployment and rapid population growth in Timor-Leste. Meeting the local demands – both from the Timorese Government and the grassroots – with support in vocational skills and basic education (literacy, numeracy) was prioritised when developing the *DPP* (2025-2030).

Upskilling efforts rely heavily on cooperation between international partners and Timorese domestic stakeholders. In this regard, as part of its largest development assistance to Timor-Leste, Australia has introduced vocational upskilling programmes such as the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC).²⁴¹ The APTC has since transitioned into Pacific Australia Skills, which will build on the successes of the APTC through the development of shared training standards and institutional links between Australia, Timor-Leste, and Pacific nations.²⁴² This is hoped to enhance workforce readiness for domestic and overseas employment. While targeted programmes like the Pacific Australia Skills can greatly address technical gaps, the sustainability of these initiatives is ultimately tied to the quality of the broader education system.

Strengthening Education for Sustainable Development

Education forms the foundation of sustainable development. However, the education landscape in Timor-Leste would benefit even more when the quality and accessibility is improved through strategic planning. Almost half of urban Timorese (39 percent) expressed significant concern over the low quality public education available in Timor-Leste, as reflected in the data from the *Tatoli! 2025 Survey*. This is because educational disparities impact their children's competitiveness in the local and global labour market.

At the heart of any capacity building model in Timor-Leste is the need to build a highly educated and skilled labour force. In this regard, Australia has played a pivotal role through the provision of scholarships. Since 2002, Australia has been a leading scholarship provider to Timorese students. In fact, thanks to its scholarship programme, more than 350 talented emerging Timorese leaders who are alumni of some of Australia's best universities now occupy leadership positions across the government sector, the private sector, and civil society.²⁴³

In addition, the Australia Awards in Timor-Leste is a competitive international award designed to empower emerging global leaders with the skills and knowledge to drive sustainable development within their home countries. By providing world-class education and professional networking, these scholarships serve as a strategic investment in the next generation of change-makers, fostering deep diplomatic and developmental ties between Australia and the international community. This initiative is continued in the *Parseria Foun Ba Era Foun* (New Partnership for a New Era) between Australia and Timor-Leste, which highlights the importance of scholarship support in gaining access to quality education and strengthening the connection between the two nations and its peoples.²⁴⁴

The Australian Government also created the New Colombo Plan (NCP), a prestigious scholarship programme for eligible Australian undergraduates seeking enriching internship experiences in countries in the Indo-Pacific, including Timor-Leste. The programme is intended to promote better intercultural understanding and people-to-people links between the two countries.²⁴⁵ As these returned scholars and

workers integrate into the local economy, the complementarity between Australian support and Timorese ambition solidifies a foundation for a modern, autonomous state capable of navigating the complexities faced by emerging economies.

Another significant aspect of Australia's development assistance focused on education is the recognition that development cannot be sustained without access to and inclusivity in education. One of the focus for Australia's PHD in the area of education is to improve the quality and inclusiveness of basic education, contributing to better literacy and numeracy outcomes for all Timorese children. To achieve this, Australia works in partnership with the Government of Timor-Leste to strengthen the national education system. One of the many initiatives is the collaboration with the Ministry of Education to implement the Apoiu ba Lideransa, Mentoria no Aprendizajen (ALMA) program, which stands for Support to Leaders, Teachers, and Learning.²⁴⁶ This initiative focuses on the professional development of school leaders and teachers to ensure the effective delivery of the National Basic Education Curriculum. The ALMA program relies on local mentors who are trained to provide direct support and facilitate peer-based learning. Beyond training and mentoring, the Australian education programme has also supported the rollout of the Eskola.tl platform, a digital tool that assists school leaders in managing school data and reporting on classroom observations. Notably, ALMA places a specific emphasis on inclusive education and increasing the representation of female leaders in rural schools.²⁴⁷

In pursuing the goal of strengthening Timor-Leste's education system, Australia also prioritises the empowerment of women and girls, and people with disabilities. Notably, Australia had committed to providing 80 million AUD over four years for gender and disability inclusive health care and education, as stated in Australia's recent Official Development Assistance Budget Summary 2025-26.²⁴⁸ By prioritising social mobility and inclusivity for women and people with disabilities, these educational pathways ensure that Timor-Leste's future is steered by a diverse and highly skilled cohort of professionals.

Among the ways this can be achieved is through tailored English language programmes. This is an important aspect of Australia's educational support, as women and people with disabilities are equipped with skills necessary to prepare them for the

competitive scholarship programme.²⁴⁹ The emphasis on inclusivity through capacity building ensures that education becomes a tool of social mobility by opening wider opportunities for the underprivileged, instead of being afforded to the elites.

Based on available data, Australia is one of the countries that provides the highest development assistance to Timor-Leste. This shows the consistency of Australian support and the strength of the bilateral relationship between the two countries.²⁵⁰ More importantly, we feel that Australia’s development assistance reflects a holistic investment in Timor-Leste’s human capital. This is due to the thoughtfully designed development partnership plan, which is meant to drive sustainable development for the enjoyment of generations to come. Based on our research and information as mentioned in the *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan (2025-2030)*, we summarise some of the many contributions Australia has made as Timor-Leste’s leading bilateral development partner in Table 6 below:

Table 6: Pillars of Partnership: Australia’s Strategic Development Support and Impact in Timor-Leste²⁵¹

Support Sector	Type of Activity/ Programme	Impact and Outcomes
Education & Human Capital	Australia Awards and technical scholarships	Hosted over 350 emerging leaders to study in Australia; alumni now hold leadership positions in both the government and the private sectors.
	Basic education support focused on literacy and numeracy	Improved teaching practices and learning outcomes; 68 percent of adults are now literate, up from previous decades.
Economic Growth & Labor	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme	Over 20,000 workers have been employed in Australia, allowing them to save money, build technical skills, and provide remittances. ²⁵²
	Private sector initiatives in agriculture and tourism	Increased the value of additional market transactions and generated additional income for beneficiaries.

Support Sector	Type of Activity/ Programme	Impact and Outcomes
Infrastructure	Telecommunications (undersea internet cable)	Timor-Leste's first undersea internet cable will connect to an Australian network in Darwin, which is hoped to transform the digital sector and government services.
	Transport & Aviation (Dili International Airport and roads)	Supported airport redevelopment and rural road maintenance to improve regional connectivity and municipal services.
Health & Nutrition	Maternal and child health services	Supported specialised health care and standardised training modules; increased the percentage of community health centres competent in obstetric and neonatal care.
Security & Governance	Defence Cooperation Program (DCP) and Policing Partnership	Developed a responsive Timor-Leste Defence Force (F-FDTL) and improved PNTL capability through a community policing model.
	Public Financial Management (PFM)	Strengthened planning, budgeting, and accountability across 108 organisations, including better budget execution in municipal health services.
Gender & Social Inclusion	Ending Violence against Women and Children (Nabilan)	Provided extensive services to survivors of sexual and GBV.



Credit: Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia.

“The people of Timor-Leste do not need to be told what it means to be oppressed, to be persecuted, and to have violence and bloodletting inflicted on them for you have gone through and suffered the mayhem and atrocities. But you have also emerged stronger, more durable and more resolved not to have such cruelty being perpetrated against you or other vulnerable people. And while some nations have demonstrated moral cowardice in spite of being even more economically advanced than Timor-Leste, you have demonstrated the courage of your moral convictions against cruelty and sheer injustice.”

**The Honourable Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim,
Prime Minister of Malaysia**

Speech from the Presidential Lecture & Acceptance of the Conferment of the Grand Collar of the Order of Timor-Leste on 24 September 2025.

PART V

Conclusion







Credit: Media team of the President's Palace, Dili.

Chapter 10:

Lessons on Forgiveness from Dili to the World

Timor-Leste is a relatively small, yet remarkable nation that has risen from the ashes of occupation and violent internal conflict in the years following its independence. It would be easy for narratives about Timor-Leste to be overshadowed by its traumatic past. Civilisational history is evidence that our experience in wars, occupation, and conflict have shaped a nation's future trajectory for better or for worse.

Indeed, Timor-Leste's history has shaped its future in ways that defy expectations. Instead of allowing themselves to remain victimised by former transgressions, the Timorese have found the magnanimity to forgive those who have wronged them, reconcile with the past, and work together towards a shared future. This is the strength of Timor-Leste. Perhaps it is not yet quantifiable in dollars and cents, but the value that ASEAN's newest member brings to the bloc is immeasurable as a model of genuine peace that emphasises peaceful coexistence over retributive justice.

Partners by Choice: The Evolution of Timor-Leste–Indonesia Relations

Perhaps the strongest indication of Timor-Leste's model of peace is the situation at the border between Timor-Leste and Indonesia's West Timor. It was formerly a place that bore witness to intense violence, particularly during the Scorched Earth campaign of 1999, which resulted in refugees being driven out by the hundreds of thousands. Yet today, it has become a border that does not treat the citizens of the two nations with any animosity related to the past. Indonesia is the number one trading partner of Timor-Leste, and business is conducted peacefully across the border. Professor Braithwaite observed that there are unusually low levels of hate speech among the Timorese due to the strong culture of forgiveness, which also contributes to the absence of religious antagonism. "They never had anti-Muslim rhetoric... nor did the Indonesians play the anti-Christian card."²⁵³

At present, the warm relations between the Timorese and the Indonesians are proof that reconciliation works. Citizens of Timor-Leste are able to speak the same language as Indonesians, appreciate the same pop culture, and are often reported to celebrate in shared festivals. During our data collection, we were happy to note that the Indonesian language is widely used, and Indonesian songs are very popular. These details may seem insignificant, but they reflect the absence of hatred regarding the past.

Further evidence of this can be seen in the current state of the border. Ms Idelta Maria Rodrigues described it as a zone of shared activity rather than one of tension and hostility. She explained the unique diplomatic style of Timorese leaders who chose to embrace their former occupiers:

*"You see the border area between Timor-Leste and Indonesia? So they can go farming together, you know, they can go attend the cultural ceremony together. They can go to religious institutes together... We don't want to create conflict. We would like to create peace, stability... So, we created a good relationship in the border area because we learned one topic called, goodbye conflict, welcome development."*²⁵⁴

The reality of the situation at the border speaks volumes about the enduring relationship between Timor-Leste and Indonesia which was no doubt difficult to establish, but their commitment to unity and shared prosperity is what drives bilateral relations and allows peace between the two nations to thrive. In this regard, Timor-Leste and Indonesia have shown the world that the wounds of the past can be overcome.

In our interview with Ms Milena Maria da Costa Rangel, she articulated the importance of reconciliation:

*"They [Indonesia] are our immediate neighbours, and we share a lot of similarity. We share the same culture. We have a lot of Timorese living in other parts of Indonesia, a lot of Indonesian from the other side also come and, you know, live in Timor. So, we are family... It's not easy to just swallow the bitter past. But, today, we are so proud that our two countries came up with this initiative in early stage. And now we can enjoy very much how these initiatives can benefit both society, both communities of two nations."*²⁵⁵

From her statement, what we can also surmise is the importance of family and a sense of belonging, which sustain peace in ways that international diplomacy may not be able to reach. Ms Maria de Lurdes Martins de Sousa Bessa reflected on the strong bonds the Timorese have with the Indonesian people:

*"... There are still a lot of Indonesians living in Timor. And it's very peaceful. They're married to locals. You know, they have their families... If you go to Kupang or Atambua [in Indonesia near to Timor-Leste] on the weekends, there's a lot of Timorese over there. And they come here and we go there. It's really peaceful."*²⁵⁶

This heartfelt relationship established between the Timorese and Indonesians is a tangible testament to successful reconciliation. More importantly, it is rooted not just in policy, but in the daily lives of their citizens, providing a solid foundation for enduring peace between the two peoples. This social harmony has opened the door for Timor-Leste's eventual accession to ASEAN with the strong support of Indonesia as one of the regional bloc's founding members.

Despite Timor-Leste's complex past with Indonesia, the two countries have the strongest bilateral relations to date. In President José Ramos-Horta's book, *Words of Hope in Troubled Times*, he shared an excerpt from a letter written to him by the Indonesian Foreign Minister at the time, Mr Adam Malik, which reads:

*"The independence of every country is the right of every nation, with no exception for the people of (East) Timor... whoever will govern in Timor in the future after independence can be assured that the government of Indonesia will always strive to maintain good relations, friendship and cooperation for the benefit of both countries."*²⁵⁷

The people of Timor-Leste, together with Indonesians, did what many other nations failed to do: acknowledge and forgive what had happened in the past and move together towards a peaceful and prosperous future. President Ramos-Horta shared with us advice that it is not easy to follow, yet he and the people of Timor-Leste have managed to practice it, namely, by not making sweeping judgments against one's enemies of the entire civilian population. This is reflected in the sharing

of Mr Ariff Abdullah Sagan, who noted that this approach has allowed Timorese and Indonesians to peacefully coexist: "Until now, many Timorese married with the Indonesian, [they] live together."²⁵⁸

Timor-Leste's history of reconciliation, achieved within a relatively short span of time, can become one of its most tangible contributions to ASEAN. True peace is not merely the absence of conflict in a nation's history; rather, it lies in how conflict is overcome, and whether peace can be sustained. In this regard, Timor-Leste has proven to be a neighbour with valuable lessons to share with the world.

This is because ASEAN membership is more than just about economic opportunity. Without regional peace, development could never be sustained. In Prime Minister Gusmão's statement upon the formal admission of Timor-Leste, he mentioned: "We pledge to work with all Member States to keep our region peaceful, open, and prosperous, and to be part of efforts to build resilience, deepen unity, and ensure that no one is left behind."²⁵⁹ Timor-Leste's success in maintaining what is anecdotally described as "the world's most peaceful border," with the cooperation of Indonesia, already serves as the physical manifestation of this pledge.

A Model for Peace and Conflict Resolution

Timor-Leste's approach to peacebuilding is unique because it moves away from the emphasis on retributive justice through punitive means. Instead, the Timorese have managed to find a balance between both modern and traditional approaches: an integration of restorative justice with customary practices of conflict resolution (*lisan*), and inclusive dialogue among the community.²⁶⁰ This duality allows for a more holistic approach to justice and peacebuilding, as it does not negate the cultural and customary practices of the people. Rather, it acknowledges their importance as an integral part of the nation's healing process.

The effectiveness of the Timorese model of peace and conflict resolution can be seen in the post-2006 internal crisis period, the resolution of which was greatly facilitated by traditional leadership and inclusive dialogue with affected communities.

Ms Felicidade de Sousa Guterres, who served as the secretary of the national dialogue team during the 2006 crisis, shared regarding the dialogues that were conducted among the leaders and members of the community.²⁶¹ In these sessions, the traditional element of *lisan* was also incorporated. Everyone was able to share their thoughts and the positions of both sides were acknowledged. More importantly, she explained that the purpose of the dialogue was to find a solution together that would benefit all parties. This is a true example of inclusivity in action, which could serve as a valuable lesson from Timor-Leste to the world.

High Religious Tolerance and Inclusivity

How are the Timorese able to be so forgiving of the past, and truly inclusive in a world often fractured by religious sectarianism? We observed that this can be attributed to the cultural and religious values of the people. The religious demography of Timor-Leste is approximately 97 percent Catholic, with a small percentage of other religious minorities, including Muslims. Despite having such a big majority of Catholic adherents, there is very little to no reports of inter-religious tension towards other minorities. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that Dr Mari Alkatiri, a Muslim, served as both the first and seventh Prime Minister of this overwhelmingly Catholic nation — chosen twice by his people, and accepted without question. Ms Lurdes Bessa opined that their identity as Catholics has influenced their behaviour, stating “We’re very tolerant. That’s something that makes us actually very, very proud. And we live together in a very healthy, peaceful and healthy way.”²⁶²

This spirit is further reflected in state support for religious minorities. For example, the Government of Timor-Leste provides financial support to all major recognised religions and grants diplomatic passports to their leaders.²⁶³ President Ramos-Horta explained this policy with characteristic humour and pragmatism:

“Our government policies, every year in our national budget, we allocate funding for all the three main recognised religions. So according to the number of followers that each has, the Catholics, of course, got the biggest share... then the Protestants and Muslims.. And all of them [Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims], their leaders obtain diplomatic passports when they travel.”

He further shared that Muslim holidays (Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha) are recognised as national holidays, despite the Muslim population being a very small minority and jokingly attributed this to the Timorese love for holidays. While the humour of the President is appreciated, we observed the nation's serious commitment to inclusion, which has no doubt helped shape positive relations among the people: "In actuality, you know, the relationship is good... the leaders since independence were very good in uniting the people, maintaining the rich diversity."²⁶⁴

Mr Ariff Sagram confirmed this harmonious coexistence. He noted that despite being a small minority, the call to prayer (adhan) is broadcast loudly without any issues.

*"For the example, here in this area, Muslim only maybe less than 5 percent. But Alhamdulillah, you see the big mosque here, adhan five times. [...] And for the Timorese, adhan like alarm for them. Oh, now noon already, or afternoon, or morning."*²⁶⁵

Mr Ariff Sagram also shared that the Catholic Church had financed the construction of the An-Nur mosque. This stands as a powerful symbol of the specific brand of Timorese inclusivity — one in which national identity serves as the unifying factor: you are Timorese first. This mindset is important in fostering a sense of belonging for everyone as equal and valuable citizens. In Prime Minister Gusmão's statement during a plenary session titled, Harvesting Human Rights for Independence and Democracy, he explained the relationship between democracy and human rights which "feed on acceptance and inclusion of those who are different or think differently."²⁶⁶

This spirit of inclusivity is gradually extending to other marginalised groups, though challenges remain. Ms Leonésia Tecla da Silva highlighted efforts to include people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in peace processes through the National Mediation Network.²⁶⁷

Sustaining Peace

The narrative of Timor-Leste's independence struggle often highlights the armed resistance, as well as the diplomatic and clandestine fronts. Today, Timor-Leste is a peaceful nation with relatively low levels of serious crime being reported. The

Timorese are united in their national identity rather than being fractured along racial, ethnic, or religious lines. Whilst Timor-Leste's peace process is nothing short of commendable, it becomes all the more important to sustain the peace that the Timorese had fought so hard to achieve. Support should be directed towards agents of social healing and conflict prevention. Although the tragedies during the occupation and the 2006 internal crisis have passed, efforts at reconciliation must remain ongoing as a prerequisite for sustainable peace. Prime Minister Gusmão articulated that peacebuilding is a whole-of-nation approach when he said:

*"We also acknowledge that reconciliation is vital for preventing recurring conflict and for building peaceful and prosperous societies. This reconciliation must come from within, and must include everyone's participation: political and religious leaders, the private sector, and civil society, particularly women and children."*²⁶⁸

Looking back at Timor-Leste's trajectory from the ashes of occupation and its subsequent rise which culminated in it officially joining ASEAN on 26 October 2025, it is clear that the Timorese have successfully crafted a national identity rooted in peace. The ability to forgive what had happened in the past, and not demonise any party, in order to ensure peaceful coexistence for all people in the future, speaks volumes about the Timorese peace model they were able to build. In addition, their holistic justice system acknowledges customary beliefs dear to the community, whilst incorporating comprehensive dialogue, as well as modern restorative approaches. Timor-Leste's philosophy of reconciliation and the mechanisms put in place to ensure justice is met, serve as a guide for other nations on the precipice of polarisation, as they provide a framework for peacebuilding. In our interview with our Foreign Minister, Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan, he described Timor-Leste's peace model as a manifestation of ASEAN's core objectives:

*"In the ASEAN Charter, among the reasons for ASEAN's inception is to maintain and enhance peace, security and stability, and further strengthen peace-oriented values in the region. The Timorese model of peace and reconciliation is an embodiment of the very purpose of ASEAN. It demonstrates that regional peace and security is possible and sustainable if ASEAN Member States engage in genuine dialogue and work collaboratively towards this goal."*²⁶⁹

Now, as Timor-Leste has joined its neighbours as a part of ASEAN, it brings value far greater than economic potential. To honour this transition, we must move beyond viewing Timor-Leste through the lens of development assistance alone. True regional inclusivity calls upon us to not only include Timor-Leste into our fold; but it also requires us to believe in the value of their unique contributions. The strength of the Timorese should not be equated with the strength of their currency. Rather, Timor-Leste's lessons on forgiveness and reconciliation can strengthen our moral compass. Timor-Leste has managed to do what many countries continue to struggle with: repair and reinforce relationships that were once broken.

In doing so, Timor-Leste has been able to heal from the tragedies of the past, and be inclusive in working towards shared prosperity. This allows us to hope that meaningful peace can be achieved and sustained: a peace that protects the innocence of childhood, promotes the well-being of families, and ensures that progress is measured not only by material development but also by the enduring happiness of its people in the generations to come.



Boys in wooden goggles catch fish off Atauro island, Timor-Leste.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Martine Perret.



A young boy plants a rice crop in the village fields.

Credit: UN Photo, photographer Martine Perret.



Portrait of a young girl
in the Citrana area of
Oecusse, Timor-Leste.

*Credit: UN Photo,
photographer Martine Perret.*





Timorese women at Binani in Turiscai dressed in their best during President Ramos-Horta's visit to the historic site where Nicolao Lobato made his last stand.

Credit: Media team of the President's Palace, Dili.



Timorese men at Binani in Turiscai during President Ramos-Horta's visit to the historic site where Nicolao Lobato made his last stand.

Credit: Media team of the President's Palace, Dili.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Murni Wan Mohd Nor holds a PhD in Constitutional Law and Human Rights. She is currently serving her secondment as an Expert Researcher at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where Murni oversees the research and publications unit. She has released her seminal work, *From Hate to Hope: A Holistic Approach to Address Hate Speech*, as well as edited the book, *Fostering Resilient and Equitable Futures Through Inclusivity and Sustainability* published by IDFR. With over 15 years of experience, she leads research on diplomacy, effective communication, human rights, and the prevention of violent extremism. Murni has also spearheaded projects for the UNDP and served as a consultant for Malaysia's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on freedom of expression. She frequently trains Malaysian and international diplomats in effective media communication and analytical writing. Her expertise has been engaged by global bodies including META and the International Communities Organisation (ICO). Beyond her institutional role, she is a dedicated advocate for anti-racism, having authored the children's book, *When Love Heals Hate*. Murni believes that mitigating hate speech requires a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach rooted in education, inclusion, and compassion.

Nurul Farhah Ab Aziz is a Research Officer at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She graduated from the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) with a Bachelor in Political Science. Previously, Farhah has worked at Media Prima Berhad and the Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute (ASLI), specialising in corporate communications and public relations. Farhah has a deep passion for international relations, political communications, and studying the role that religion plays in politics. In her spare time, Farhah is busy being a mother to her six rescued cats and enjoys running marathons.



Key Interviewees from Malaysia

Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan
Malaysia's Minister of Foreign Affairs

Tan Sri Dr Syed Hamid Albar Tan Sri Syed Jaafar Albar
Former Minister of Foreign Affairs

Tan Sri Hamidon Ali
Former Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the United Nations

H.E. Dato' Amarjit Singh Sarjit Singh
Former Ambassador of Malaysia to Timor-Leste (21 March 2023 - 7 April 2026)

Mr Azril Abd Aziz
Deputy Director-General, ASEAN-Malaysia National Secretariat for the ASEAN Political-Security Community Division

Mr Devrin Anak Jeck
Undersecretary, International Cooperation and Development Division (ICADD), Department of Multilateral Affairs

Dato' Dr Mohamad Rameez Yahaya
*Director, Centre for Leadership, Negotiation, and Public Diplomacy,
Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR)*



Key Interviewees from Timor-Leste

H.E. Dr José Ramos-Horta

President of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

H.E. Milena Maria da Costa Rangel

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste's Vice Minister of ASEAN Affairs

H.E. Lisualdo Gaspar

Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste to Malaysia

H.E. Idelta Maria Rodrigues

Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste to New Zealand

H.E. Maria de Lurdes Martins de Sousa Bessa

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Belgium

H.E. Felicidade de Sousa Guterres

Former Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia and New Zealand

Mr Hugo Maria Fernandes

Chief Executive Officer at Centro Nacional Chega!

Mr Ariff Abdullah Sagan

Former President of the Islamic Community, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

Ms Lusitania Lopes

Human Rights Lawyer

Ms Leonésia Tecla da Silva

National Consultant for Women, Peace, and Security with UN Women Timor-Leste



Key Interviewees from Australia

H.E. Danielle Heinecke
High Commissioner of Australia to Malaysia

H.E. Caitlin Wilson
Ambassador of Australia to the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

H.E. Dr Justin Lee
First Assistant Secretary, Pacific Melanesia Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Mr Luke Arnold
Assistant Secretary, Timor-Leste Branch, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Emeritus Professor William Maley
Emeritus Professor, The Migration Hub, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs

Professor John Braithwaite
Distinguished Professor, College of Asia and the Pacific, School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet) Australian National University

Dr Lia Kent
Senior Fellow, School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet) Australian National University

The list of key interviewees does not reflect everyone whom we had interviewed, as those who wish to remain anonymous are not named to respect their privacy

END NOTES

¹ Government of Timor-Leste. (2022). *Timor-Leste population and housing census 2022: Preliminary results*. https://timor-leszte.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/census-preliminaryresults2022_4.pdf

² Fibiger, Mattias. (March 2021). "A Diplomatic Counterrevolution: Indonesian Diplomacy and the Invasion of East Timor." *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 2: 587–628. <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=57362>

³ The Center for Justice and Accountability. (n.d.). *Timor-Leste (East Timor)*. <https://cja.org/where-we-work/archives/timor-leszte-east-timor/>

⁴ Guterres, F. de S. (2025, August 13). *Interview Session with H.E. Felicidade de Sousa Guterres* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁵ Braithwaite, J. (2012). Evaluating the Timor-Leste peace operation. *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 16(3-4), 282–305. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-1604005>

⁶ Guterres, F. de S. (2025, August 13). *Interview Session with H.E. Felicidade de Sousa Guterres* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁷ Da Silva, L. T. (2025, August 16). *Interview Session with Ms Leonesia Tecla Da Silva* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁸ Braithwaite, J. (2012). Evaluating the Timor-Leste peace operation. *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 16(3-4), 282–305. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-1604005>

⁹ Bessa, M. L. de S. (2025, August 12). *Interview Session with H.E. Maria Lurdes de Sousa Bessa* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hodge, J. (2013). The Catholic Church in Timor-Leste and the Indonesian Occupation: A Spirituality of Suffering and Resistance. *South East Asia Research*, 21(1), 151–170. <https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2013.0134>

¹² Lundry, C. (2002). *From passivity to political resource: The Catholic Church and the development of nationalism in East Timor*. *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia*, 38(1). <https://asj.upd.edu.ph/mediabox/archive/ASJ-38-1-2002/lundry.pdf>

¹³ Kohen, A. S. (2000). The catholic church and the independence of East Timor. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 32(1–2), 19–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2000.10415776>

¹⁴ United Nations. (n.d.). *UNMIT background*. United Nations Peacekeeping. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/unmit/background.shtml>

¹⁵ Maley, M. (2023). *Timor-Leste: Resilient elections built on experience* [Case study]. International IDEA. <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2023.49>

¹⁶ Guterres, F. de S. (2025, August 13). *Interview Session with H.E. Felicidade de Sousa Guterres* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁷ Crockford, F. (2007). Contested belonging: East Timorese youth in the diaspora. In *ANU Open Research (Australian National University)*. <https://doi.org/10.25911/5d7a2c4123538>

¹⁸ Guterres, F. de S. (2025, August 13). *Interview Session with H.E. Felicidade de Sousa Guterres* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁹ Braithwaite, J. (2012). Evaluating the Timor-Leste peace operation. *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 16(3–4), 282–305. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-1604005>

²⁰ Brown, M. A. (2013). *Timor-Leste Report: Addressing legitimacy issues in fragile post-conflict situations to advance conflict transformation and peacebuilding*. The University of Queensland. https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/UoQ_Grant_Timor_Leste_Report.pdf

²¹ The Center for Justice and Accountability. (n.d.). *Timor-Leste (East Timor)*. <https://cja.org/where-we-work/archives/timor-leste-east-timor/>

²² Bessa, M. L. de S. (2025, August 12). *Interview Session with H.E. Maria Lurdes de Sousa Bessa* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ramos-Horta, J. (2025, June 20). *Interview Session with President José Ramos-Horta* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

²⁶ United Nations Security Council. (1999, October 25). *Resolution 1272 (1999)* [S/RES/1272(1999)]. United Nations Digital Library. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/291410?ln=en>

²⁷ Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. (n.d.). *Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste* [PDF]. Government of Timor-Leste. https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Constitution_RDTL_ENG.pdf

²⁸ United Nations Secretary-General. (2002, September 27). *Secretary-General's remarks at the flag-raising ceremony for Timor-Leste* [Statement]. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/former-secretary-general/statements/2002-09-27/secretary-generals-remarks-the-flag-raising-ceremony-for-timor-leste>

²⁹ Braithwaite, J. (2012). Evaluating the Timor-Leste peace operation. *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 16(3-4), 282–305. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-1604005>

³⁰ Fernandes, H. M. (2025, August 14). *Interview Session with Mr Hugo Maria Fernandes* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

³¹ Ibid.

- ³² Da Silva, L. T. (2025, August 16). *Interview Session with Ms Leonesia Tecla Da Silva* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ³³ Gaspar, L. (2026, February 11) *Interview Session with Mr Lisualdo Gaspar* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ³⁴ Fernandes, H. M. (2025, August 14). *Interview Session with Mr Hugo Maria Fernandes* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ³⁵ Braithwaite, J. (2012). Evaluating the Timor-Leste peace operation. *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 16(3-4), 282–305. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-1604005>
- ³⁶ Fernandes, H. M. (2025, August 14). *Interview Session with Mr Hugo Maria Fernandes* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ³⁷ Guterres, F. de S. (2025, August 13). *Interview Session with H.E. Felicidade de Sousa Guterres* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ³⁸ Ramos-Horta, J. (2025, June 20). *Interview Session with President José Ramos-Horta* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ³⁹ Bessa, M. L. de S. (2025, August 12). *Interview Session with H.E. Maria Lurdes de Sousa Bessa* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ⁴⁰ Maley, W. (2025, September 10). *Interview Session with Emeritus Professor William Maley* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ⁴¹ Braithwaite, J. (2025, September 8). *Interview with Professor John Braithwaite* [Unpublished Interview transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ⁴² Braithwaite, J. (2012). Evaluating the Timor-Leste peace operation. *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 16(3-4), 282–305. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-1604005>

⁴³ Braithwaite, J. (2025, September 8). *Interview with Professor John Braithwaite* [Unpublished Interview transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁴⁴ Kent, L. (2025, October 10). *Interview Session with Dr Lia Kent* [Unpublished Interview transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁴⁵ Gusmão, K. R. X. (2024). *The sky is ours: Speeches on unity, prosperity, and development in a new Timor-Leste, 2017-2024*. Longueville Media.

⁴⁶ Lopes, L. (2025, August 30). *Interview Session with Lusitania Lopes* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁴⁷ Fernandes, H. M. (2025, August 14). *Interview Session with Mr Hugo Maria Fernandes* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ramos-Horta, J. (2025, November 11). *Speech of President J. Ramos-Horta at the closing session of the 9th World Peace Forum*. Presidency of the Republic of Timor-Leste. <https://presidenciairepublica.tl/speech-of-president-j-ramos-horta-at-the-closing-session-of-the-9th-world-peace-forum/>

⁵⁰ Brown, M. A. (2013). *Timor-Leste Report: Addressing legitimacy issues in fragile post-conflict situations to advance conflict transformation and peacebuilding*. The University of Queensland. https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/UoQ_Grant_Timor_Leste_Report.pdf

⁵¹ Novak, P. (2023). *Timor-Leste's Uncertain Future*. Lowy Institute Analysis. Sydney: Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org>

⁵² Ramos-Horta, J. (2025, June 20). *Interview Session with President José Ramos-Horta* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Phan, G. (Director). (2006). *A Hero's Journey* [Film]. Lux Lucis; Gil Scrine Films.

⁵⁵ Braithwaite, J. (2025, September 8). *Interview with Professor John Braithwaite* [Unpublished Interview transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁵⁶ Fernandes, H. M. (2025, August 14). *Interview Session with Mr Hugo Maria Fernandes* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁵⁷ Braithwaite, J. (2025, September 8). *Interview with Professor John Braithwaite* [Unpublished Interview transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁵⁸ Maley, W. (2025, September 10). *Interview Session with Emeritus Professor William Maley* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁵⁹ Lopes, L. (2025, August 30). *Interview Session with Lusitania Lopes* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ramos-Horta, J. (2015). Humility and compassion: The pre-requisites of moral leadership. Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University (SMU). <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=ami>

⁶² Presidência da República de Timor-Leste. (2022). *Ramos-Horta: The first 100 days and our future challenges*. <https://ramoshorta.com/ramos-horta-the-first-100-days-and-our-future-challenges/>

⁶³ Rodrigues, I. M. (2025, July 25). *Interview Session with H.E. Idelta Maria Rodrigues* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations

⁶⁴ Tatoli (Timor-Leste News Agency). (2023). Xanana Gusmão sworn in as Timor-Leste's new Prime Minister. <https://en.tatoli.tl/2023/07/01/xanana-gusmao-sworn-in-as-timor-lestes-new-prime-minister/19/>

⁶⁵ Government of Timor-Leste. (2011). *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*. Dili: Government of Timor-Leste. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Timor-Leste-Strategic-Plan-2011-20301.pdf>

⁶⁶ Charles Darwin University (CDU). (2023). Chancellor's Tribute: Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão. <https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2023-06/kay-gusmao.pdf>

⁶⁷ Government of Timor-Leste. (2024). Biography of His Excellency Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=32776&lang=en>

⁶⁸ Novak, P. (2023). *Timor-Leste's Uncertain Future*. Lowy Institute Analysis. Sydney: Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org>

⁶⁹ The Asia Foundation. (2025). *Tatoli! 2025: A Survey of the Timorese People* (9th Edition). Dili: The Asia Foundation. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/tatoli-a-survey-of-the-timorese-people-2025-results/>; Lin, J., Seah, S., Suvannaphakdy, S., & Martinus, M. (2025). Timor-Leste in ASEAN: Is It Ready to Join? Trends in Southeast Asia, Issue 1. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/TRS1_24.pdf

⁷⁰ Smith, C. Q. (2022). Local peace governance in post-war Timor-Leste: Reconceiving governance ambiguity as a formalised political unsettlement. *Peacebuilding*, 10(3), 278–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2021.1955516>

⁷¹ Guterres, F. de S. (2025, August 13). *Interview Session with H.E. Felicidade de Sousa Guterres* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁷² Rodrigues, I. M. (2025, July 25). *Interview Session with H.E. Idelta Maria Rodrigues* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations

⁷³ Sagan, A. (2025, August 16). *Interview Session with Mr Ariff Sagan* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Government of Timor-Leste. (2011). *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*. Dili: Government of Timor-Leste. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Timor-Leste-Strategic-Plan-2011-20301.pdf>

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Lopes, L. (2025, August 30). *Interview Session with Lusitania Lopes* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁷⁹ Government of Timor-Leste. (2011). *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*. Dili: Government of Timor-Leste. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Timor-Leste-Strategic-Plan-2011-20301.pdf>

⁸⁰ International Monetary Fund [IMF]. (2025). *Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste: 2025 Article IV Consultation*. IMF Country Report No. 25/123. Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund.; Government of Timor-Leste. (2011). *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*. Dili: Government of Timor-Leste. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Timor-Leste-Strategic-Plan-2011-20301.pdf>

⁸¹ Conroy, P. (2022, December 15). *Partnering with Timor-Leste to improve airport facilities* [Media release]. Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. <https://ministers.dfat.gov.au/minister/pat-conroy/media-release/partnering-timor-leste-improve-airport-facilities>

⁸² ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group. (2025). *Adopted Progress Report on the Implementation of the Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full Membership in ASEAN*. ASEAN Secretariat.

⁸³ Government of Timor-Leste. (2025, September 24). *Joint Statement for the Official Visit of the Prime Minister of Malaysia to the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste*. Dili: Presidency of the Council of Ministers. <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/final-joint-statement-for-the-official-visit-of-the-prime-minister-of-malaysia-to-the-democratic-republic-of-timor-leste-23-24-september-2025?inheritRedirect=true>

⁸⁴ Bessa, M. L. de S. (2025, August 12). *Interview Session with H.E. Maria Lurdes de Sousa Bessa* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁸⁵ Novak, P. (2023). *Timor-Leste's Uncertain Future*. Lowy Institute Analysis. Sydney: Lowy Institute. <https://www.loyyinstitute.org>

⁸⁶ Albanese, A., & Gusmão, K. R. X (2026, January 28). *Joint declaration on establishing a Parseria Foun ba Era Foun (New Partnership for a New Era) between the Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste and the Government of Australia* [Joint statement]. Prime Minister of Australia. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-declaration-establishing-parseria-foun-ba-era-foun-new-partnership-new-era>

⁸⁷ Government of Timor-Leste. (2011). *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*. Dili: Government of Timor-Leste. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Timor-Leste-Strategic-Plan-2011-20301.pdf>

⁸⁸ Ismail, S., & Pereira, M. (2025, November 17). *Timor-Leste expands airport, eyes major gas project ahead of 2029 ASEAN summit*. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/timor-leste-airport-upgrades-greater-sunrise-gas-field-asean-summit-5471756>

⁸⁹ Lowy Institute. (2023). *Timor-Leste's Uncertain Future*. Lowy Institute Analysis. Sydney: Lowy Institute. https://www.loyyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/NOVAK%2C%20Timor-Leste%2C%20PDF%20v3_0.pdf

⁹⁰ Medina, A. F. (2025, January 23). *The Greater Sunrise gas field: A catalyst for Timor-Leste's future*. ASEAN Briefing. <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/the-greater-sunrise-gas-field-a-catalyst-for-timor-lestes-future/>

⁹¹ Mahathir, M. M. (2003, October 23). *The official dinner hosted by His Excellency Dr Mari Alkatiri, Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste* [Speech transcript]. Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/ucapan/?m=p&p=mahathir&id=1315>

⁹² Mohamad Hasan. (2026, April 13). *Interview Session with Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mobamad bin Haji Hasan* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁹³ Albar, S. H. (2025, June 12). *Interview with Tan Sri Dr Syed Hamid Albar* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ramos-Horta, J. (2025, June 20). *Interview Session with President José Ramos-Horta* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia. (n.d.). *History – Embassy of Malaysia, Dili*. https://www.kln.gov.my/web/tls_dili/history

⁹⁸ Yahaya. R. (2025, February 25). *Interview Session with Dato Dr Mohamad Rameez Yahaya* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

⁹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia. (n.d.). *History – Embassy of Malaysia, Dili*. https://www.kln.gov.my/web/tls_dili/history

¹⁰⁰ Bernama. (2003, October 22). *Dr Mahathir tiba di Dili untuk lawatan tiga hari*. http://lib.perdana.org.my/PLF/Digital_Content/Prominent_Leaders/Mahathir/News_1968-2004/2001-2005/2003aj/dr%20mahathir%20tari.PDF

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Mahathir, M. M. (2003, October 23). *The official dinner hosted by His Excellency Dr Mari Alkatiri, Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste* [Speech transcript]. Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/ucapan/?m=p&p=mahathir&id=1315>

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Bernama. (2003, October 22). *Dr Mahathir tiba di Dili untuk lawatan tiga bari*. http://lib.perdana.org.my/PLF/Digital_Content/Prominent_Leaders/Mahathir/News_1968-2004/2001-2005/2003aj/dr%20mahathir%20tari.PDF

¹⁰⁷ Ali, H. (2025, April 30). *Interview with Tan Sri Hamidon Ali* [Unpublished Interview transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁰⁸ United Nations. (2006, October 2). *Report of the United Nations Independent Special Commission of Inquiry for Timor-Leste* [PDF]. Security Council Report. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/TL%20Report%20Sp%20Comm%20of%20Inquiry%20Oct%202006.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ Ali, H. (2006). *Statement by Ambassador Hamidon Ali, Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the United Nations on the Situation in Timor-Leste*. United Nations Security Council. <https://www.un.int/malaysia/sites/www.un.int/files/Malaysia/2006-Statements-Security-Council/6082.pdf>

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ali, H. (2009). *Statement by H.E. Mr Hamidon Ali, Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the United Nations at the Security Council Open Debate on the Situation in Timor-Leste*. United Nations Security Council. <https://www.un.int/malaysia/sites/www.un.int/files/Malaysia/2009-Statements-Security-Council/63unga039.pdf>

¹¹² Singh, A. (2025, August 11). *Interview Session with Dato Amarjit Singh Sarjit Singh* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹¹³ Hassan, W. S. W., Dollah, R., & Peters, D. (2018). Malaysia-Timor Leste's Relations, 2002-2015. *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, 1(4), 452-464. <https://www.mendeley.com/catalogue/9cbb562d-4c19-3cd0-8b0a-360e313c2cbf/>

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Singh, A. (2025, August 11). *Interview Session with Dato Amarjit Singh Sarjit Singh* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹¹⁶ Ramos-Horta, J. (2025, June 20). *Interview Session with President José Ramos-Horta* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹¹⁷ United Nations Security Council. (2012, February 23). *Resolution 2037 (2012) (S/RES/2037(2012))*. United Nations. [https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2037\(2012\)](https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2037(2012))

¹¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2025). *Executive summary for Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN* [Unpublished manuscript]. Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹¹⁹ Hussein, H. (2012). *Statement by H. E. Ambassador Hussein Haniff, Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the United Nations at the Security Council Debate on the Situation in Timor-Leste*. United Nations. https://www.un.int/malaysia/sites/www.un.int/files/Malaysia/2015-Statements-Security-Council/66unga68_timor-leste.pdf

¹²⁰ Malaysia Peacekeeping Centre. (2026, February 13). *International Law of Armed Conflict (ILOAC) Course Serial M238*. [Facebook Post]. <https://www.facebook.com/100066621698542/posts/1270254051871973/?mibextid=wwXlfr&rdid=piwiXugj73mstlLk#>

¹²¹ Government of Timor-Leste. (2025, November 4). *Meeting of the Council of Ministers on November 4th 2025* [Press release]. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/?lang=en&p=45912>

¹²² Prime Minister's Office Malaysia. (2025). *Instagram post by PMX during gala dinner hosted by President Ramos-Horta*. Prime Minister's Office.

¹²³ Gaspar, L. (2026, February 11) *Interview Session with Mr Lisualdo Gaspar* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹²⁴ Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia. (2024, October 11). *Remarks of YAB Prime Minister at the handing over ceremony of the ASEAN chairmanship*. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/ms/ucapanterkini/remarks-of-yab-prime-minister-at-the-handing-over-ceremony-of-the-asean-chairmanship/>

¹²⁵ Mohamad Hasan. (2026, April 13). *Interview Session with Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan*[Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹²⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. (2025a). *Press Release - PMX visit to TL 23 -24 Sept*. Putrajaya. <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/final-joint-statement-for-the-official-visit-of-the-prime-minister-of-malaysia-to-the-democratic-republic-of-timor-leste-23-24-september-2025?inheritRedirect=true>

¹²⁷ Jeck, D. A. (2025, July 30). *Interview with Mr Devrin Anak Jeck (ICADD)* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹²⁸ Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP). (n.d.). *Good Governance and Institutional Reforms: Building a Democratic Future*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. <https://mtcp.kln.gov.my/courses/detail2/13>; Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP). (n.d.). International basic maritime crime scene preservation course (IBMCSPC). Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. <https://mtcp.kln.gov.my/courses/detail2/8> ; Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP). (n.d.). Networking Technology with IOT Applications in Digital Economy. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. <https://mtcp.kln.gov.my/courses/detail2/26>

¹²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2025). *Executive summary for Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN* [Unpublished manuscript]. Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹³⁰ Jeck, D. A. (2025, July 30). *Interview with Mr Devrin Anak Jeck (ICADD)* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹³¹ Azril, A. A. (2025, July 28). *Interview with Mr Azril Abd Aziz* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹³² Rangel, M. M. da C. (2025, August 12). *Interview with H.E. Milena Maria da Costa Rangel* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations

¹³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia. (2025, September 24). *Joint statement for the official visit of the Prime Minister of Malaysia to the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste*, 23 & 24 September 2025. https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/speeches-statements/-/asset_publisher/statement/content/final-joint-statement-for-the-official-visit-of-the-prime-minister-of-malaysia-to-the-democratic-republic-of-timor-leste-23-24-september-2025?inheritRedirect=false

¹³⁴ Government of Timor-Leste. (2025, September 24). *Joint Statement for the Official Visit of the Prime Minister of Malaysia to the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste*. Dili: Presidency of the Council of Ministers. <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/final-joint-statement-for-the-official-visit-of-the-prime-minister-of-malaysia-to-the-democratic-republic-of-timor-leste-23-24-september-2025?inheritRedirect=true>

¹³⁵ Wong, P., & Hasan, M. (2025). *7th Malaysia-Australia Annual Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Statement*. Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/7th-malaysia-australia-annual-foreign-ministers-meeting-joint-statement>

¹³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. (2024, December 2). *Joint statement for the official visit of the Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste to Malaysia*, 1–3 December 2024. https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/speeches-statements/-/asset_publisher/statement/content/joint-statement-for-the-official-visit-of-the-prime-minister-of-the-democratic-republic-of-timor-leste-to-malaysia-1-3-december-2024

¹³⁷ Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, Malaysia. (2024, August 30). *Press statement: Day 2 — Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) official visit to Timor-Leste* [PDF]. <https://www.rurallink.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/v2-Press-Statement-Day-2-DPM-TL.pdf>

¹³⁸ The Asia Foundation. (2025). *Tatoli! 2025: A Survey of the Timorese People* (9th Edition). Dili: The Asia Foundation. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/tatoli-a-survey-of-the-timorese-people-2025-results>

¹³⁹ Government of Timor-Leste. (2011). *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*. Dili: Government of Timor-Leste. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Timor-Leste-Strategic-Plan-2011-20301.pdf>

¹⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. (2025a). *Press Release - PMX visit to TL 23 -24 Sept*. Putrajaya. <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/final-joint-statement-for-the-official-visit-of-the-prime-minister-of-malaysia-to-the-democratic-republic-of-timor-leste-23-24-september-2025?inheritRedirect=true>

¹⁴¹ Bernama. (2025, September 23). *INFRA holds international training for Timor-Leste officials – Ahmad Zaid*. <https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2470520>

¹⁴² Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia. (2025). *Speech By The Honourable Dato' Seri Anwar Bin Ibrahim Prime Minister Of Malaysia At The Timor-Leste: Building Shared Future With Asean Dinner & Fundraising*. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/28-OCT-2025-TIMOR-LESTE-BUILDING-SHARED-FUTURE-WITH-ASEAN-DINNER-%5E0-FUNDRAISING.pdf>

¹⁴³ Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia. (2025). *Timor-Leste Entry Completes ASEAN Family – PM Anwar*. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/en/news-en/timor-leste-entry-completes-asean-family-pm-anwar/>

¹⁴⁴ Azril, A. A. (2025, July 28). *Interview with Mr Azril Abd Aziz* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁴⁵ Mohamad Hasan. (2026, April 13). *Interview Session with Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁴⁶ Singh, A. (2025, August 11). *Interview Session with Dato Amarjit Singh Sarjit Singh* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁴⁷ Shofa, J. N. (2022, July 21). *Easier to enter heaven than ASEAN, says Timor Leste president*. Jakarta Globe. <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/easier-to-enter-heaven-than-asean-says-timor-leste-president/>

¹⁴⁸ Gaspar, L. (2026, February 11) *Interview Session with Mr Lisualdo Gaspar* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁴⁹ ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group. (2025). *Adopted Progress Report on the Implementation of the Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full Membership in ASEAN*. ASEAN Secretariat.

¹⁵⁰ Azril, A. A. (2025, July 28). *Interview with Mr Azril Abd Aziz* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group. (2025). *Adopted Progress Report on the Implementation of the Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full Membership in ASEAN*. ASEAN Secretariat.

¹⁵³ Singh, A. (2025, August 11). *Interview Session with Dato Amarjit Singh Sarjit Singh* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Rangel, M. M. da C. (2025, August 12). *Interview with H.E. Milena Maria da Costa Rangel* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁵⁹ ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group. (2025). *Adopted Progress Report on the Implementation of the Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full Membership in ASEAN*. ASEAN Secretariat.

¹⁶⁰ Lin, J., Seah, S., Suvannaphakdy, S., & Martinus, M. (2024). *Timor-Leste in ASEAN: Is It Ready to Join?* Trends in Southeast Asia, Issue 1. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/TRS1_24.pdf

¹⁶¹ Pahlepi, J. (2025, March 2). *Timor-Leste's Upcoming Membership to ASEAN: Clearer Guidance Needed*. Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore. <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/blogs/timor-lestes-upcoming-membership-to-asean-clearer-guidance-needed/>

¹⁶² Azril, A. A. (2025, July 28). *Interview with Mr Azril Abd Aziz* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁶³ Rangel, M. M. da C. (2025, August 12). *Interview with H.E. Milena Maria da Costa Rangel* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ ASEAN Secretariat. (2025, October 25). Timor-Leste accedes to the SEANWFZ Treaty. ASEAN. <https://asean.org/timor-leste-accedes-to-the-seanwftz-treaty/>

¹⁶⁷ Rangel, M. M. da C. (2025, August 12). *Interview with H.E. Milena Maria da Costa Rangel* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁶⁸ Government of Timor-Leste. (2025, October 2). *Timor-Leste consolidates preparations for full ASEAN membership*. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=45466&lang=en&n=1>

¹⁶⁹ Azril, A. A. (2025, July 28). *Interview with Mr Azril Abd Aziz* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁷⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia. (2025, September 24). *Joint statement for the official visit of the Prime Minister of Malaysia to the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 23 & 24 September 2025*. https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/speeches-statements/-/asset_publisher/statement/content/final-joint-statement-for-the-official-visit-of-the-prime-minister-of-malaysia-to-the-democratic-republic-of-timor-leste-23-24-september-2025?inheritRedirect=false

¹⁷¹ Rangel, M. M. da C. (2025, August 12). *Interview with H.E. Milena Maria da Costa Rangel* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁷² ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group. (2025). *Adopted Progress Report on the Implementation of the Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full Membership in ASEAN*. ASEAN Secretariat.

¹⁷³ Albanese, A., & Gusmão, K. R. X (2026, January 28). *Joint declaration on establishing a Parceria Foun ba Era Foun (New Partnership for a New Era) between the Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste and the Government of Australia* [Joint statement]. Prime Minister of Australia. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-declaration-establishing-parceria-foun-ba-era-foun-new-partnership-new-era>

¹⁷⁴ ASEAN (2025, May 26). *ASEAN Community Vision 2045: "Resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred ASEAN"* (Adopted by the 46th ASEAN Summit). https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/05.-ASEAN-Community-Vision-2045_adopted.pdf

¹⁷⁵ Mohamad Hasan. (2025, October 25). *Remarks by Y.B. Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, on the occasion of the deposit of the instruments of accession by Timor-Leste to the ASEAN Charter and the SEANWFZ Treaty*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/remarks-y-b-dato-seri-utama-haji-mohamad-bin-haji-hasan-minister-of-foreign-affairs-malaysia-the-occasion-of-the-deposit-of-the-instruments-of-accessi>

¹⁷⁶ Zalani, A. (2025, October 27). *Anwar: Malaysia to treat Timor-Leste as full ASEAN partner after historic accession*. Malay Mail. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/10/27/anwar-malaysia-to-treat-timor-leste-as-full-asean-partner-after-historic-accession/196078>

¹⁷⁷ Penny Wong. (2023, July 7). *Address to the Timor-Leste Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Dili, Timor-Leste*. Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/address-timor-leste-ministry-foreign-affairs-and-cooperation-dili-timor-leste>

¹⁷⁸ Wong, P. (2023, July 7). *Address to the Timor-Leste Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation*. Australian Government. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/address-timor-leste-ministry-foreign-affairs-and-cooperation-dili-timor-leste>

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. ; Pereira, A. (2025, July 11). *Personal Testimony of His Excellency the Minister of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Mr Agio Pereira*. Australian and Timor-Leste Friendly Cities Conference, Dili. https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/EN_MPCM-cidades-amigas-Aust-TL-2025-07-11-VDIST.pdf

¹⁸⁰ Horton, D. (2022, August 26). *Remember and forgive: Lessons on alliance building from Timor-Leste*. The Cove. <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/remember-and-forgive-lessons-from-timor-leste>

¹⁸¹ Pereira, A. (2025, July 11). *Personal Testimony of His Excellency the Minister of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Mr Agio Pereira*. Australian and Timor-Leste Friendly Cities Conference, Dili. https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/EN_MPCM-cidades-amigas-Aust-TL-2025-07-11-VDIST.pdf

¹⁸² Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. (2013). *Visit to Timor-Leste and Indonesia: Report of the Delegation*. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia.

¹⁸³ Westerman, W. (2022). Entry by Air and Sea: The Littoral Challenges of Operation ASTUTE, 2006. *Australian Army Journal*, 19(2). <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/library/australian-army-journal-aaj/volume-19-number-2/entry-air-and-sea-littoral-challenges-operation-astute-2006>

¹⁸⁴ Maley, W. (2025, September 10). *Interview Session with Emeritus Professor William Maley* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁸⁵ Department of Defence. (2025, September 19). *New chapter of cooperation with Timor-Leste*. Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-09-19/new-chapter-cooperation-timor-leste>

¹⁸⁶ Maley, W. (2025, September 10). *Interview Session with Emeritus Professor William Maley* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁸⁷ Wong, P. (2023, July 7). *Address to the Timor-Leste Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation*. Australian Government. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/address-timor-leste-ministry-foreign-affairs-and-cooperation-dili-timor-leste>

¹⁸⁸ Maley, W. (2025, September 10). *Interview Session with Emeritus Professor William Maley* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue. (2023). *What does it look like for Australia to Shape a Shared Future with Timor-Leste: Options Paper*. <https://asiapacific4d.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Timor-Leste-final-web.pdf>

¹⁹² Australian Government Department of Defence. (n.d.). *Pacific Maritime Security Program – Maritime capability*. *Pacific Maritime Security Program – Maritime capability*. <https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/programs-initiatives/pacific-engagement/maritime-capability?>

¹⁹³ Australian Government, Department of Defence. (n.d.). *Indo-Pacific Endeavour*. <https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/operations/indo-pacific-operations/indo-pacific-endeavour>

¹⁹⁴ Parliament of Australia. (2023). *Chapter 2 - Australia–Timor-Leste defence cooperation*. Joint Standing Committee on Treaties. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Treaties/SOFATimor-Leste/Report_210/Chapter_2_-_AustraliaTimor-Leste_defence_cooperation

¹⁹⁵ Kilic, R. (2026, February 12). *A case for an Australia–Indonesia–PNG–Timor-Leste partnership*. Australian Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/a-case-for-an-australia-indonesia-png-timor-leste-partnership/>

¹⁹⁶ Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. (2013). *Visit to Timor-Leste and Indonesia: Report of the Delegation*. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=jfadt/timor_indo_del/report/front.pdf

¹⁹⁷ Australian Embassy Timor-Leste. (n.d.). *Defence Co-Operation*. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. <https://timorleste.embassy.gov.au/dili/Defence.html>

¹⁹⁸ Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. (2013). *Visit to Timor-Leste and Indonesia: Report of the Delegation*. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=jfadt/timor_indo_del/report/front.pdf

¹⁹⁹ Department of Defence. (2025, October 7). *Building bonds in Timor-Leste*. Australian Government Department of Defence. <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-10-07/building-bonds-timor-leste>

²⁰⁰ Department of Defence. (2025, September 19). *New chapter of cooperation with Timor-Leste*. Australian Government.

²⁰¹ United Nations Development Programme. (2019). *Parliaments as partners supporting the Women, Peace and Security agenda: A global handbook*. UNDP. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Parliament_as_partners_supporting_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_-_A_Global_Handbook.pdf

²⁰² Department of Defence. (2025, September 19). *New chapter of cooperation with Timor-Leste*. Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-09-19/new-chapter-cooperation-timor-leste>

²⁰³ Department of Defence. (2023, July 31). *Walking, talking and sharing in Timor-Leste*. Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2023-07-31/walking-talking-sharing-timor-leste>

²⁰⁴ Department of Defence. (2025, December 9). *Female soldiers inspired to lead*. Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-10-03/female-soldiers-inspired-lead>

²⁰⁵ Albanese, A. (2026, January 29). *Address to the National Parliament of Timor-Leste*. Prime Minister of Australia. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-national-parliament-timor-leste>

²⁰⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]. (2025). *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan 2025-2030*. Australian Government.

²⁰⁷ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2024). *DFAT guidance note: Locally led development* [PDF]. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-guidance-note-locally-led-development.pdf>

²⁰⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]. (2025). *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan 2025-2030*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030.pdf>

²⁰⁹ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d.). *Australia–Timor-Leste development partnership plan 2025–2030*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030>

²¹⁰ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d.). *Australia–Timor-Leste development partnership plan 2025–2030*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030>

²¹¹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]. (2025). *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan 2025-2030*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030.pdf>

²¹² The Asia Foundation. (2025). *Tatoli! 2025: A Survey of the Timorese People* (9th Edition). Dili: The Asia Foundation. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/tatoli-a-survey-of-the-timorese-people-2025-results>

²¹³ Kent, L. (2025, October 10). *Interview Session with Dr Lia Kent* [Unpublished Interview transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

²¹⁴ Rangel, M. M. da C. (2025, August 12). *Interview with H.E. Milena Maria da Costa Rangel* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

²¹⁵ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]. (2025). *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan 2025-2030*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030.pdf>

²¹⁶ Dayant, A., Stanhope, G., Rajah, R., & Buckley, H. (2025). *Southeast Asia Aid Map: 2025 Key Findings Report*. Lowy Institute. <https://seamap.lowyinstitute.org/assets/downloads/Lowy%20Institute%20Southeast%20Asia%20Aid%20Map%20-%202025%20Key%20Findings%20Report.pdf>

²¹⁷ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d.). *Development Assistance in Timor-Leste*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/timor-leste/development-assistance/quality-services-timor-leste>

²¹⁸ Australian Government. (2026, January 29). *Strengthening our partnership with Timor-Leste*. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/strengthening-our-partnership-timor-leste>

²¹⁹ United Nations in Timor-Leste. (2024, February 5). *Reaching Timor-Leste's zero-dose children, one household at a time* [Story]. United Nations. <https://timorleste.un.org/en/259829-reaching-timor-leste%E2%80%99s-zero-dose-children-one-household-time>

²²⁰ Horta, L. (2021). *A Friend in Need: Australia and Timor Leste*. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/a-friend-in-need-australia-and-timor-leste/>

²²¹ Payne, M., & Hawke, A. (2020, March 3). *Coronavirus assistance to Pacific and Timor-Leste* [Media release]. Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/coronavirus-assistance-pacific-and-timor-leste>

²²² De Sá, J. B. (2021, September 8). *Australia sends eight Australian medical specialists to help Timor-Leste on COVID-19 and emergency*. TATOLI Agência Noticiosa de Timor-Leste. <https://en.tatoli.tl/2021/09/08/australia-sends-eight-australian-medical-specialists-to-help-timor-leste-on-covid-19-and-emergency/19/>

²²³ Bamford, M. (2020, April 15). *Australian doctors aim to stop COVID-19 from 'tearing through' Timor-Leste*. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-16/australian-doctors-help-stop-covid-timor-leste/12147180>

²²⁴ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2025, May). *Development cooperation factsheet: Timor-Leste*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/development-cooperation-fact-sheet-timor-leste.pdf>

²²⁵ United Nations Children's Fund. (n.d.). *Child survival and development*. UNICEF Timor-Leste. <https://www.unicef.org/timorleste/child-survival-and-development>

²²⁶ Government of Timor-Leste. (2011). *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*. Dili: Government of Timor-Leste. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Timor-Leste-Strategic-Plan-2011-20301.pdf>

²²⁷ UNICEF. (2024, June 11). *Memorandum of understanding signed between the Office of the Vice Prime Minister and UNICEF*. <https://www.unicef.org/timorleste/press-releases/memorandum-understanding-signed-between-office-vice-prime-minister-and-unicef>

²²⁸ Wong, B., Carvalho, C., & Overell, S. (2025). *Holistic agriculture, food and nutrition interventions for Timor-Leste (HAFOUN): A cost-benefit analysis of prioritized interventions*. Mettalytics. <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000169037/download/>

²²⁹ Government of Timor-Leste. (2025, October 2). *Government Releases Report with 9 Interventions to Strengthen Food Security and Nutrition*. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=45479&lang=en>

²³⁰ Department of Defence. (2025, October 17). *Diggers' BBQ makes a difference*. Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2024-10-17/diggers-bbq-makes-difference>

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Australian Embassy Timor-Leste. (2025). *Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) strategy 2025–2028*. https://timorleste.embassy.gov.au/files/dili/Dili%20Post%20GEDSI%20Strategy_Final%202025.pdf

²³³ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2016). *Australia–Timor-Leste partnership for human development: Investment design document*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/aus-timor-leste-partnership-for-dev-investment-design.pdf>

²³⁴ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2025, May). *Development cooperation factsheet: Timor-Leste*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/development-cooperation-fact-sheet-timor-leste.pdf>

²³⁵ Government of Timor-Leste. (2011). *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*. Dili: Government of Timor-Leste. <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Timor-Leste-Strategic-Plan-2011-20301.pdf>

²³⁶ Government of Timor-Leste. (2025). *Official Media Kit: Timor-Leste ASEAN Accession*. Dili: Government of Timor-Leste. https://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ASEAN-MEDIA-GUIDE-ENGLISH_compressed.pdf

²³⁷ The Asia Foundation. (2025). *Tatoli! 2025: A Survey of the Timorese People* (9th Edition). Dili: The Asia Foundation. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/tatoli-a-survey-of-the-timorese-people-2025-results>

²³⁸ Wigglesworth, A., & dos Santos, A. B. (2018). *Timorese migrant workers in the Australian Seasonal Worker Program*. Victoria University and National University of Timor-Leste. <https://devpolicy.org/2018-Australasian-Aid-Conference/Papers/Timorese.migrant.workers.in.SWP-Wigglesworth&dosSantos.pdf>

²³⁹ Australian Government. (2023). *Budget 2023–24: Expanding and Improving the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme*. PALM Scheme Reforms Budget Announcements Factsheet. <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/PALM%20scheme%20reforms%20Budget%20announcements%20-%20factsheet.pdf>

²⁴⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]. (2025). *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan 2025-2030*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030.pdf>

²⁴¹ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d.). *Australia–Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan 2025–2030* [PDF]. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030>

²⁴² AHC Fiji. (n.d.). *The new Regional Pacific Australia Skills Program builds on the achievements of Australian Pacific Training Coalition (APTC)* [Facebook post]. Retrieved April 17, 2026, from <https://www.facebook.com/AHCFiji/posts/the-new-regional-pacific-australia-skills-program-builds-on-the-achievements-of-/1258923509599342/>

²⁴³ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]. (2025). *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan 2025-2030*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030.pdf>

²⁴⁴ Albanese, A., & Gusmão, K. R. X (2026, January 28). *Joint declaration on establishing a Parseria Foun ba Era Foun (New Partnership for a New Era) between the Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste and the Government of Australia* [Joint statement]. Prime Minister of Australia. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-declaration-establishing-parseria-foun-ba-era-foun-new-partnership-new-era>

²⁴⁵ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]. (2025). *About the New Colombo Plan*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan/about>

²⁴⁶ Global Partnership for Education. (2025, February). *Program document: System transformation grant – Timor-Leste*. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=document/file/2025-02-program-document-system-transformation-grant-timor-leste.pdf>

²⁴⁷ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d.). *Development Assistance in Timor-Leste*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/timor-leste/development-assistance/quality-services-timor-leste>

²⁴⁸ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d.). *Australia's official development assistance budget summary 2025–26*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/corporate/portfolio-budget-statements/australias-official-development-assistance-budget-summary-2025-26>

²⁴⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]. (2025). *Australia – Timor-Leste Development Partnership Plan 2025-2030*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030.pdf>

²⁵⁰ Lowy Institute. (n.d.). *Timor-Leste*. <https://seamap.lowyinstitute.org/country/timor-leste/>

²⁵¹ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d.). *Australia–Timor-Leste development partnership plan 2025–2030*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/australia-timor-leste-development-partnership-plan-2025-2030>

²⁵² Aly, A. (2025, August 7). *Timor-Leste Australia Economic and Business Conference opening*. <https://ministers.dfat.gov.au/minister/anne-aly/speech/timor-leste-australia-economic-and-business-conference-opening>

²⁵³ Braithwaite, J. (2025, September 8). *Interview with Professor John Braithwaite* [Unpublished Interview transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

²⁵⁴ Rodrigues, I. M. (2025, July 25). *Interview Session with H.E. Idelta Maria Rodrigues* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

²⁵⁵ Rangel, M. M. da C. (2025, August 12). *Interview with H.E. Milena Maria da Costa Rangel* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

²⁵⁶ Bessa, M. L. de S. (2025, August 12). *Interview Session with H.E. Maria Lurdes de Sousa Bessa* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

- ²⁵⁷ Ramos-Horta, J. (2018). *Words of hope in troubled times: Selected speeches and writings of José Ramos-Horta*. <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/7888004>
- ²⁵⁸ Sagraan, A. (2025, August 16). *Interview Session with Mr Ariff Sagraan* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations
- ²⁵⁹ Government of Timor-Leste. (2025b, October 26). *Statement by His Excellency the Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão at the Signing of the Declaration on the Admission of Timor-Leste into ASEAN* [Press Release].
- ²⁶⁰ Braithwaite, J. (2012). Evaluating the Timor-Leste peace operation. *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 16(3-4), 282–305. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-1604005>
- ²⁶¹ Guterres, F. de S. (2025, August 13). *Interview Session with H.E. Felicidade de Sousa Guterres* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ²⁶² Bessa, M. L. de S. (2025, August 12). *Interview Session with H.E. Maria Lurdes de Sousa Bessa* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ²⁶³ Republica Democrática de Timor-Leste. (2008). *Decree-Law No. 44/2008: Juridical regime for passports* [PDF]. [https://www.migracao.gov.tl/pdf/\[0503-09\]Decree-Law%2044-2008.pdf](https://www.migracao.gov.tl/pdf/[0503-09]Decree-Law%2044-2008.pdf)
- ²⁶⁴ Ramos-Horta, J. (2025, June 20). *Interview Session with President José Ramos-Horta* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.
- ²⁶⁵ Sagraan, A. (2025, August 16). *Interview Session with Mr Ariff Sagraan* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations
- ²⁶⁶ Gusmão, K. R. X. (2024). *The sky is ours: Speeches on unity, prosperity, and development in a new Timor-Leste, 2017-2024*. Longueville Media. <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/10112448>

²⁶⁷ Da Silva, L. T. (2025, August 16). *Interview Session with Ms Leonesia Tecla Da Silva* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

²⁶⁸ Gusmão, K. R. X. (2024). *The sky is ours: Speeches on unity, prosperity, and development in a new Timor-Leste, 2017-2024*. Longueville Media. <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/10112448>

²⁶⁹ Mohamad Hasan. (2026, April 13). *Interview Session with Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan* [Unpublished Interview Transcript]. Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.



Credit: Author's own

The Rising Sun: Timor-Leste's Journey to Peace & Development presents an account of a young nation's transition from conflict to stability, tracing its path from occupation and resistance to independence, reconciliation, and nation-building. Drawing on historical research, interviews, and field observations, the book highlights both the hardships endured by the Timorese people and the sustained efforts to rebuild institutions, communities, and trust after decades of violence.

The narrative examines how independence was achieved not only through armed struggle, but also through diplomacy and faith-based support, alongside the resilience of its people. It documents the roles played by local leaders, civil society, and international partners — including Malaysia and Australia — in supporting security, governance, and post-conflict recovery.

Importantly, the book keeps its focus on the experiences of the Timorese, whose determination to rebuild their lives shaped the country's development trajectory in meaningful ways.

Another central theme of the book is reconciliation. Rather than allowing historical grievances to dominate national life, the country sought ways to move forward while acknowledging the past. This process was far from perfect, but it created the conditions necessary for stability and cooperation within society and with neighbouring countries. As Timor-Leste deepens its engagement with the region, including its accession to ASEAN, its experience offers practical insights for other societies emerging from conflict.

The book also challenges narrow definitions of development. While economic indicators are often used to measure progress, Timor-Leste demonstrates that resilience and the well-being of its citizens are equally important. The ability of the Timorese to forgive past actions and rebuild relationships within and among themselves, as well as with others, is a strong indication of meaningful progress that statistics alone cannot capture.

The concluding chapter emphasises a key lesson from Timor-Leste's experience: sustainable peace is the foundation upon which development must rest. Economic progress and institutional reform are important, but they are unlikely to endure without social cohesion.

Balanced, informative, and accessible, this work offers a realistic portrait of Timor-Leste's journey and the lessons it holds: that lasting development depends on sustainable peace, and that cooperation within societies and across borders remains essential for building a prosperous future.

ISBN 978-983-2220-44-2



INSTITUTE OF DIPLOMACY
AND FOREIGN RELATIONS (IDFR)
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS MALAYSIA