

Rabbi Marc. H Tanenbaum Memorial Lecture

"East Timor, Where the Power of Ideas and Faith Triumphed Over Violence"

Presented by José Ramos-Horta, Nobel Peace Laureate
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(The following text was prepared by José Ramos-Horta for his Memorial Lecture. In his actual presentation, he also spoke extemporaneously.)

First of all, I wish to thank our kind hosts for bringing us to New York to partake in this evening's ceremonies. I am conscious of the fact that before me, far more important people, more eloquent and with greater influence in world affairs and, hence, more deserving of attention have been on this podium.

But we also know that the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, and in particular its founder, Dr. Georgette Bennett, care about the small people, the poor and dispossessed, les damnés de la terre (Franz Fanon). Hence, we dared to accept the challenge to be here tonight.

I bow to the memory of a great human being, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, for a life dedicated to peace and harmony, for religious tolerance and understanding. Few people have endured as much suffering, humiliation and persecution as Rabbi Tanenbaum's people, who have come a long way in almost 6,000 years of humanity's history.

The Holocaust is only the latest and the greatest threat to the very existence of this extraordinary people, the Jews. Being a Jew and yet not hating your fellow human beings for what has been done to you, inspires us to be equally tolerant towards those who have done much harm to us.

Fr. Filomeno de Jesus, SJ, is here with me. He is typical of the new generation of East Timorese, educated (Ph.D. from Oxford, fluent in seven languages), dedicated, generous, combative. He comes from the Church of the poor, a Church that has always stood with the weak and dispossessed, provided shelter, was the voice of hope throughout almost five centuries.

Tonight you are honoring a great Church, a great community of people, the Church of my county. My good friend Bishop Basilio do Nascimento could not come. He was really upset when he communicated his decision to stay behind to handle a painful crisis in his diocese.

I grew up Catholic and spent years in a mission school as a devout servant of God, but I know that long ago he canceled the reserved place for me in heaven. I can only trust that in His immense goodness, He will spare me the eternal flames. I will be spending only a few hundred years purging my sins in the intermediate fires of Purgatory until I am cleansed of all my earthly sins.

You may think that I am saying all these nice things about my Church only in a shameless attempt to save myself from the eternal flames. You are partly right for thinking so. But there is also a lot of sincerity in what I am saying about my Church, the bishops and the priests, the great nuns and lay workers of my country. In a few words, without these great humble men and women we would not be free today.

For 24 long, dark years, while the rest of the world was silent and indifferent, it was our humble and poor Church, its priests and nuns who inspired our people, shared with them the little food they had, gave them shelter, comforted the widows and the prisoners, cared for the thousands of orphans, and raised the voice of our people.

Xanana Gusmão is no doubt the greatest hero our people ever had. He is an exceptional human being, caring, compassionate, erudite, a brilliant strategist and a cold tactician. But he would not have been able to mobilize our people if the Church was not doing its part.

We are all too aware of the hatred and violence that have engulfed communities in many parts of the world and how religion has been invoked and used to justify oppression, colonization and domination. The terms

"crusade" and "jihad" are too tragically associated with two of the world's greatest religions and encapsulate a long history of violent suppression of other believers.

Fortunately, in East Timor our humble Church has been a force of moderation, tolerance and reconciliation.

Ladies and gentlemen, your choice this year for this great honor is more than justified.

We are at an extraordinary juncture in humanity's history. We are entering a New Millennium in the Christian calendar after the century of impressive, dramatic, and often tragic developments.

Whenever I have to join the chorus and circus marking the New Millennium, I cannot but wonder how Christians managed to impose on everybody else our own calendar without hearing a barrage of cynical remarks coming from Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Persians and Hindus. It seemed as if civilization began only 2,000 years ago and might actually end with big fireworks on midnight of 31 December 1999. Fortunately nothing went wrong that evening. I celebrated it in my country for the first time after 24 years of forced absence.

Now I hear that actually the end of the world and the second coming of Christ will take place this coming 31st December.

Our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters should be amused. After all, Jews have long, long ago passed the great threshold of the year 2000. The Muslims do not have to worry about the end of the world for a few hundred years or so. It seems that if anything bad is going to happen at the sound of midnight 31 December 2000, it will happen only to us Christians since it is our calendar.

Cynicism aside, reflecting on the past 100 years of humanity's history, I am overwhelmed by both the progress and tragedies that have engulfed the world. The figures are mind boggling. At least 150 million have died in violent conflicts. World War II alone accounted for 40 million dead. But since the end of the great war, some 40 million more people have died, and another 4 million have perished since the end of the Cold War.

There are some 30 armed conflicts raging in the world today. These are mostly wars within countries that pit ethnic and religious communities against each other. Ethno-nationalism, tribalism and religious fundamentalism that have driven countries to war against each other have taken over from the Cold War rationale of the 50's and 60's.

But I fear that the wars of the future will be fought over resources such as land, food and water, and they will be fought in the poorer regions of the world, such as Africa and Asia. And whenever there is poverty, there are religious demagogues promising prosperity, inciting hatred and violence, in order to attain political power. So the wars over resources will also be fought under the banner of religion and ethnicity.

What can we do, what can the United States do, to alleviate poverty and hence reduce the threat of instability and war?

The United States is a global power and an engine of the world's economy, trade and security. Its awesome power, applied with vision and compassion, has transformed continents and economies. The Marshal Plan, Europe, and the reconstruction of Japan come to mind.

The three major regions of the world that are home to the largest number of the world's poorest do not face external threats. However, there is a common threat to peace and security that comes from within our respective boundaries with a destabilizing potential for our region as a whole.

I refer to the threat that comes from unemployment and poverty, from the millions of our poor who cannot afford even a meal a day, who do not have a roof, access to clean water, school and medical care.

Industrialization and modernization brought us the benefits of the 20th century, but at an enormous price. This price is visible in our streets and slums that are filled with millions of our poor and dispossessed who abandoned the rural areas for the illusion of a better life in the cities blackened by pollution.

We are too conscious that the opinion of a person from a small country does not count much in the grand scheme of things. But since we were invited to speak and say what we want, here are some not terribly new ideas on how we could address this major security problem.

The United States, Canada, EU and Japan could co-host a series of regional initiatives focused on tackling no more than three issues that affect the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people, namely housing, clean water and medical care.

We favor smaller regional initiatives focused on modest goals over the international extravaganzas that have achieved very little. What has really changed since the Copenhagen 1995 Social Summit? Are things going to change much with next month's Social Summit in Geneva? What messages and plan of action are we going to hear in this year's Millennium extravaganza of Heads of States in New York. A reaffirmation of the principles of the Charter?

We will not elaborate on the specific steps required to mobilize the billions of dollars needed for such a strategy. But debt relief and debt cancellation are some obvious indispensable steps.

On the other hand, the developing countries must spend less on armies and weapons. The billions of dollars saved could be directed to address the explosive problems of unemployment and poverty that are more dangerous to our region's stability than the hypothetical or imagined external adversaries.

We fail to understand the rationale behind the nuclear arms race in South Asia only because we naively believe that the real threat to India's and Pakistan's security come from within the two countries and not from each other. No amount of nuclear warheads will resolve the threat to peace that comes from abject poverty.

Weapons-producing countries must do their share by stopping their relentless efforts to sell their fashionable toys of war to those who cannot afford even to feed their people.

Compassion and self-interests were behind the Marshall Plan that rescued Europe and Japan from the ashes of WWII. Needless to say, the United States benefited handsomely from this enterprise. This is not meant in any negative way. Our point is simply that a Marshall Plan focused on poverty reduction will generate political and economic dividends for the contributing countries. Today, the combined wealth of the G7 and the EU as a whole could well achieve the same results for the poorest regions of the world.

If one belongs to the school of thought which holds the view that the now defunct bi-polar world dominated by two conflicting power blocs was a positive factor, then we miss the Cold War. However, if we believe that the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the former USSR was a positive development, the Washington-centered, uni-polar world is not necessarily negative.

The awesome power of the only surviving super-power can be a tremendous instrument to foster peace and prosperity if directed with care and sensitivity. In the case of East Timor, the United States has been a good friend and we can only express our gratitude for its substantial support throughout the past difficult months.

The EU, with its potential for developing into a single union of more than 20 countries comprising 400 million people, will inevitably generate a more balanced world order. It is not far-fetched to imagine that one day Russia will find its way into the great European house. However, Europe has a long way to go before its constituting members surrender their sovereignty and national interests to an effective central authority to become a more unified and credible alternative to the United States.

The competing trade and economic interests between the United States and Europe will often prevail over their common cultural and political values, but this rivalry is far more positive and preferable than the dangerous ideology-based rivalries of the Cold Era.

Ladies and gentlemen, the last two years have seen dramatic changes in Indonesia's history. In late November last year, only two months after president Xanana's release from the Cipinang prison, we were in Jakarta and met with the new president of Indonesia and several cabinet ministers, including all the top military leaders.

In late February this year, we welcomed in East Timor the visit of our friends, President Gus Dur and the armed forces chief Adm. Widodo, on a historic trip to our devastated country. Our people warmly welcome our friends because they all know Gus Dur and hold him in high esteem. Indonesia has opened a representative office in Dili and we have agreed that an East Timorese mission will be established in Jakarta, initially, as part of the UNTAET mission here.

Now I want to ask you, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, to stop for a moment and try to remember whether there has been a precedent in history of such a dizzying normalization, of relations between parties locked in a bloody conflict for a quarter of a century. In several instances even a changed of government in the two countries did not diminish the animosity.

The ashes of the destruction of our country were still burning, a quarter of our people languishing in camps across the border, bodies were being uncovered, and yet we did not hesitate to undertake a painful and historic trip to the new Indonesia in November last year.

When the Indonesian delegation visited us in February this year, it met no hostility and was able to see the destruction of the country, a destruction of such magnitude possible only if planned and carried out by a powerful institution.

The Indonesian people are fortunate that God has given them a great Muslim scholar and human rights advocate, a man of vision, moral rectitude and compassion, to lead their country in these dangerous times. The East Timorese are equally fortunate to have been given an exceptional human being as their leader. It is thanks to these two great individuals that our countries at war for 24 years are now working hard and moving towards normalizing relations. In late January this year, president Xanana Gusmão led a mission to Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea and China where we were warmly received.

The current East Timorese leadership and the whole of the country are conscious of our geography and acutely aware of the need to foster relations with our neighbors. However, a balanced relationship with neighbors can be accomplished only if we do not lose sight of other regional and extra-regional players. Hence, you will not see us focusing all our attention and energy on Indonesia and Australia.

We will spare no effort in building relations with other regional countries such as New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, Thailand, China, South Korea and Japan. We are grateful for their support.

Beyond the region, two major power blocs weigh heavily in our thinking as we begin to develop a long term foreign policy and a security framework. While East Timor will seek to develop strong relations with its neighbors, this will not be to the detriment of our relations with countries of the EU and the United States. Many in Europe have been our friends for a long time.

For better or for worse, Portugal colonized us for almost 500 years. Maybe it was East Timor's own fault that it happened to be on the travel route of the Portuguese navigators. Our relations with Portugal are unique, forged over centuries and became specially close in the last quarter of a century when this small European country refused to abandon its historic and moral responsibility towards a people it once colonized.

We share with the EU and the United States solid values on human rights, democracy and the rules of law; values of the East Timorese learned the hard way, fought for and, hence, will never give up. After all, the East Timorese, like their Indonesian brothers and sisters who have been in the receiving end of repression, know only too well that human rights and fundamental freedoms are not Western abstract notions but rather they are truly concrete, specific rights that affect their daily lives.

Because of its sheer size, resources and strategic location, Indonesia is pivotal to the region's stability and security. However, the old notion that the security and stability can be maintained by fear and by the use of force has been thoroughly discredited not only in Indonesia, but elsewhere in the world.

East Timor's future prosperity is dependent on the region's well-being and it is our own self-interests that inspire our strategic options in foreign policy. Hence, our neighbors can rest assured that East Timor will be a responsible and moderating element in the region.

We believe that our security cannot be rested only on a deterrence force, however credible it might be. We prefer a dynamic relationship with our neighbors based on shared interests.

We are touched by the warm support from president Gus Dur and from other ASEAN leaders to our possible membership in ASEAN. It is quite obvious that ASEAN is one of the most effective regional organizations, and its importance in world affairs is beyond question. This is a tribute to the leaders of the region that have built this regional body into its current world class status.

Australia has been generous to us and we never forget our friends. We hope that relations between Jakarta and Canberra will improve soon. The recent proposal for a tri-partite meeting between presidents Gus Dur, Xanana Gusmpo and Prime Minister John Howard was immediately backed by Xanana. We sincerely hope that proposed meeting will take place sooner rather than later.

President Gus Dur is a man of dialogue and the idea of a tri-partite meeting is consistent with his life-long conviction that dialogue should always be the means for people and governments to resolve their differences.

In the next few months we will be guided by our friends in the region as to the best approach and steps for regional membership.

East Timor is a dot on the map, but it has managed to capture the world's imagination, achieved the unthinkable and demolished certain well-entrenched academic arrogance that tends to dismiss small nations as unviable. In this global economy the notion that the size of a country is a *sine quo non* criteria for economic viability is no longer valid. We are conscious of our limitation and weaknesses. But our people have proved to be among the most determined, resilient and creative. After all, the people are a country's best resource.

But we also have material resources that make East Timor a viable economic entity. Agriculture, fisheries and tourism are some of the basic components of our economy. Other resources such as oil and gas are very promising.

With humility, always willing to learn from our friends and neighbors, with dogged determination and creativity, we will build a society deserving of the sacrifice of so many and the trust of the international community.

To those in Indonesia who did a lot of harm to us, we extend a hand of reconciliation and friendship, for we know they did not harm only us. They did much harm to themselves and to the good name of their own country. Hence, we can hope that God will inspire them to atone for the harm they have caused so many and become better persons.