

*This article was published in Tetum in several newspapers and websites to commemorate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the restoration of Timor-Leste's independence.*

## **Restoration of Independence and Restoration of the Dignity of the People**

*By Celestino Gusmão, National Alliance for an International Tribunal, and La'ó Hamutuk.  
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20 May 2017 marks 15 years after the restoration of independence for the people of Timor-Leste, the independence proclaimed by the late Francisco Xavier do Amaral and FRETILIN on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1975, which was immediately followed by destruction from Indonesian military aggressors, who invaded this territory just as it was in the process of decolonization.

On 20 May 2017, The Government inaugurated a statue of the proclaimer Amaral at the roundabout next to the former Mercado Lama (now Dili Convention Center), and near Freedom of the Press Avenue. This monument is not only a physical representation of our late hero, but also represents the ideology of total liberation that he and others defended during difficult times. I believe that this monument will continue to encourage and provide determination to young people to fight for economic equality during this current period of independence.

On 20 May 2002, the Timorese people proudly rejoiced in restoring the political sovereignty which had been suppressed by the Indonesian military. Even though we are no longer under foreign occupation, Timor-Leste faces many remaining challenges to fully restore our independence. The United Nations administrations did not manage to end impunity for the international crimes that occurred in Timor-Leste, and they also were unable to develop a sustainable economic system for the Timorese people, instead leaving these heavy burdens for the Timorese people to face alone as a people, a nation and a state.

Restoration is the act of rebuilding or repairing things which have been destroyed. Each of us should ponder the true significance of 'the Restoration of RDTL's Independence'.

During the illegal occupation, hundreds of thousands of Timorese people were killed by murder, forceful disappearance and hunger. The long period of famine resulted in today's suffering from chronic malnutrition for the people who escaped from death. To avoid repeating the malnutrition of the past, the Government needs to invest significantly in sectors that will help children's nutrition, to so that their capacity to be educated is not weakened and their future productivity is strong.

For the people who died, suffered and disappeared, there has been no justice or accountability. This means that the human dignity of the victims of the illegal occupation has not been restored through justice, and the perpetrators continue to escape responsibility for their crimes. Many of those with the bloodiest hands continue to hold power in Indonesia's political system and Government, which continues to obstruct democratization in Indonesia. Therefore, Timor-Leste must continue down the long road of fighting for justice for crimes against humanity.

The *Chega!* report detailed the horrific experiences that we endured during Indonesia's illegal occupation. However, our state has not restored the dignity of the orphans and the widows, or the suffering from illnesses as the result of trauma and torture. They should be addressed by

improving the public health system so that all citizens, including the survivors, will have better healthcare.

Even though there are no more foreign soldiers violating Timorese women, many of those who suffered continue to be marginalised within society. The dignity of these survivors has not been restored by the perpetrators or the Indonesian Government. Neither government, nor the international community, appears interested in repairing the damage and destruction committed by the Indonesian military.

At the moment, education and health are free for all Timorese citizens. Unfortunately, while access has been free, the quality of education during the last 15 years is inadequate. Many people in Timor-Leste still cannot access water and sanitation, and conditions which would allow them to improve their family's economy or their children's nutrition are lacking. In addition neglecting health, education, water and sanitation, the Government gives much more attention to Dili, the capital of the nation. However, most people live in rural areas and work as farmers. As a result, the majority continues to face obstacles to improving their lives.

In addition, our state is spending a large portion of Timor-Leste's limited money on large projects which lack clear returns. These projects mainly benefit private companies and the elites who manage them. Every year the state budget allocates huge amounts for ports, airports, Tasi Mane and ZEESM in Oecusse, while other sectors that could benefit the majority of the population are neglected. Our economy is largely dependent on diminishing money from oil and gas and we import most of the goods we need.

Although Government authorities often talk about economic diversification, such statements are only to divert people's attention so that they can hold on to power, rather than being honest in seeking more sustainable solutions. The discussions during the 2017 State Budget process were full of messages about prioritising education, health and agriculture, but the actual budget allocations contradict the propaganda. The major projects mentioned above continue to get large allocations in the 2017 State Budget and coming years.

Therefore, I believe that restoration should not only be about political independence, but should also reflect the dignity of the people. Restoration is meaningless when people who have political and economic power continue to live with privilege, while the majority of the population continues to live in misery.

How can our country restore the value of "equality"? It does not help the restoration process if our government abandons the grassroots and allows a small number of rich people to make decisions and benefit from the people's wealth. To restore equality, we must invest in sectors that will benefit the public and provide equal opportunities to all citizens to build a life that is fair and equal.

**Congratulations for the people of Timor-Leste! Welcome to our new President of Timor-Leste, Dr. Francisco Guterres Lu-Olo.**

A Luta Continua!