

Pope cheers East Timor's recovery while acknowledging a bishop's abuse scandal

By NICOLE WINFIELD and NINIEK KARMINI, Associated Press 10 Sep 2024

DILI, East Timor (AP) — Pope Francis received a raucous welcome Monday as he arrived in East Timor to celebrate its recovery [from a bloody and traumatic independence battle](#), even as he indirectly acknowledged an abuse scandal involving its Nobel Peace Prize-winning hero.

Timorese jammed Francis' motorcade route into town from the airport, waving Vatican and Timorese flags and toting yellow and white umbrellas — the colors of the Holy See — to shade themselves from the scorching midday sun.

“Viva el Papa!” they shouted as he passed by. The 87-year-old Francis seemed to relish the greeting, smiling broadly from the open-backed pickup truck and waving as he passed by billboard after billboard featuring his image and words of welcome.

The overwhelmingly Catholic East Timor, one of the world's poorest countries, had eagerly awaited Francis' arrival, which came on the heels of the 25th anniversary of the U.N.-backed referendum that paved the way for independence from Indonesia.

It was a far different atmosphere than when the last pope visited. St. John Paul II came in 1989, when Timor was still an occupied part of Indonesia and fighting for its freedom. After Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence a decade later, Indonesia's military responded with a scorched-earth campaign that destroyed 80% of the country's infrastructure and shocked the world. Overall, as many as 200,000 people were killed during the 24 years of Indonesian rule.

John Paul's visit, which culminated with a massive Mass on the seaside near Dili, helped draw international attention to the plight of the Timorese people and shine a spotlight on the oppressiveness of Indonesia's military occupation.

Francis arrived in Dili [from Papua New Guinea](#) to follow in John Paul's footsteps and open the third leg of his trip through Southeast Asia and Oceania. President Jose Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, two of East Timor's most revered independence heroes, greeted Francis at the airport and met with him privately.

In remarks to them and other dignitaries Monday, Francis applauded the Timorese people for having recovered from their “greatest suffering and trial” to put East Timor on the path of peaceful development. And he praised them for having reconciled with Indonesia.

But he said new challenges and problems were now confronting the country, Asia's newest, including emigration and poverty, as well as alcohol abuse and violence involving martial arts gangs.

“Let us also not forget that these children and adolescents have their dignity violated,” Francis said. “In response, we are all called to do everything possible to prevent every kind of abuse and guarantee a healthy and peaceful childhood for all young people.”

It was a generic and indirect reference to “abuse.” But it nevertheless recalled the scandal involving Timorese Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo who, along with Gusmao and Ramos-Horta, is regarded as a hero for their efforts to support Timor's independence.

Belo won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 with Ramos-Horta for campaigning for a fair and peaceful solution to the conflict.

But in 2022, the Vatican acknowledged that it had secretly sanctioned Belo two years earlier for sexually abusing young boys. The sanctions included limitations on his movements and exercise of ministry and prohibited him from having voluntary contact with minors or contact with East Timor itself. The sanctions were reinforced in 2021.

[Despite the sanctions](#), which were confirmed at the time by the Vatican spokesman and reaffirmed last week ahead of Francis' trip, many people in East Timor have stood by Belo, either dismissing, denying or diminishing the victims' claims. Some even hoped Belo, who lives in Portugal, would be on hand to welcome Francis.

Another priest, American missionary Richard Daschbach, who is also revered for his role in saving lives in the liberation fight, is [serving a 12-year sentence in a Timorese prison](#) for molesting disadvantaged girls. He was defrocked by the church.

Ramos-Horta, for his part, told The Associated Press last week that Francis' visit was [not the time](#) to revisit the church's scandals. While saying it was for the Vatican to manage, having the pope raise the matter of abuse during his visit "would be like trying someone twice," he told AP.

Francis' vague reference to abuse appeared a diplomatic balancing act, acknowledging the abuse but respecting the desires of the government hosting him and sentiment of the local church and Timorese faithful.

The issue is fraught too for the Vatican, since there has been no acknowledgment of what the Vatican knew and when about Belo, whose misconduct was reportedly an open secret in Timor for years.

John Paul allowed him to retire as head of the Timorese church two decades early in 2002, at the young age of 54, but he was then sent to Mozambique, where he worked with children.

In a [2023 interview](#) with the AP, Francis suggested that Belo, like many others before and after him, had been allowed to quietly retire rather than face any punishment for his misconduct.

The Vatican appears now to be trying to quietly ignore him: While an Aug. 28 report in Vatican News cited Belo for his help in the independence struggle, the official handbook for the Vatican delegation on the trip has scrubbed any mention of Belo from its short history on Timor and its battle for liberation.

In his speech, Ramos-Horta also avoided any mention of Belo in thanking Francis for coming 35 years after John Paul.

"We ask God to continue to hear our prayers, granting the Holy Father great health so that he can continue to inspire and guide humanity along the paths of peace and human fraternity," he said.

Only about 20% of East Timor's people were Catholic when Indonesia invaded in 1975, shortly after Portugal abandoned it as a colony. Today, some 98% of East Timor's 1.3 million people are Catholic, making it the most Catholic country in the world outside the Vatican.

"As a Catholic, we are so happy with the arrival of the pope in East Timor," said Jose de Araujo, who was among the throngs welcoming Francis.

Francis will celebrate that Catholic heritage on Tuesday especially, when he celebrates a Mass on the same seaside esplanade where John Paul celebrated Mass in 1989 and encouraged the Timorese people.

Authorities said some 300,000 people in a country of 1.3 million had registered through their dioceses to attend. But Ramos-Horta said he expected 700,000, including from Indonesia's West Timor, and the Vatican predicted 750,000.