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**Keynote Speech at the UNCLOS Conference '25 Years of the United Nations
Convention on the Law of the Sea'**

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, friends

Good afternoon, and thank you to my friend Harold Koh for your generous introduction. Before I begin, I also want to thank Dean Feinsein and recognise that without the work of Indiana University, Hamburg University and the support of ITLOS, we would not be here today. It is a pleasure to be in Hamburg with you at the International Tribunal for the Law of Sea, the home of UNCLOS.

I want to acknowledge the esteemed attendees, including Jin-Hyun Paik, Chuck Hagel, Harold Koh and Rena Lee among others, who give this conference its real importance. I know that people have travelled so far to be here and you should be proud of your commitment to strengthening UNCLOS.

I also want to extend that acknowledgment to those others who could not be here, including the delegation from Vanuatu who have sent their Ambassador to represent them here.

So far today, we have already heard from some of the leading experts in the Law of the Sea about UNCLOS and dispute resolution, and we will hear from many more before the end of the conference.

When the Law of the Sea Convention was signed in 1982, the world could not have known just how important it would be in governing the international maritime order and how effectively it would help in conflict management. Now, 25 years since it came into effect, it is right for us to reflect on the success of UNCLOS.

Few would have imagined then that a Timorese guerrilla and freedom fighter of that era would stand before a gathering like this one to celebrate Timor-Leste as a triumph of the international system. There is no longer an occupation, no longer a war, but a proud democracy marching forward into the future.

When we restored our independence, it was a magnificent day – a triumph of the international system – a moment of vindication for many who invested hope in the rules-based system and international law. I particularly remember the words of Kofi Annan: “independence will not mean the end of the world’s commitment to” Timor-Leste.

I am here not just to tell the story of a young country, a young democracy moving from fragility to resilience. A country that believes in the rule of law and the promise of the rules-based architecture, but I am here to say: we are not alone in the world.

Our success may inspire, but our challenges and our opportunities are what so many countries face – and at a time when the international system is being tested in fundamental ways.

So, let me share with you the good news and the bad news.

The good news is that Timor-Leste's story is one of hope. After the resistance, we restored independence as an independent nation but we weren't truly free because we did not have permanent maritime boundaries with either of our neighbours, Australia and Indonesia. We couldn't claim our seas and those resources which, under international law, belonged to us. We couldn't secure our own future.

As you know, this has recently changed, and that change shows what is possible through the international architecture.

After years of trying and failing, and trying and failing again just to even start a serious dialogue on maritime boundaries with Australia, in 2016 we turned to compulsory conciliation. In fact, I would like to point out we are so fortunate to have Judge Koroma, one of our esteemed Commissioners, here with us at this conference to provide his great insight into UNCLOS and our compulsory conciliation process.

The compulsory conciliation was the last resort we had - designed for countries like ours where a neighbour refuses to negotiate bilaterally but has also withdrawn from the binding dispute resolution mechanisms under UNCLOS.

The compulsory conciliation process had never been used before and came with no guarantees of success. But, the international system had delivered for us once before, and we were determined to try again, by trusting in the power of justice.

After 18 months, we managed to reach agreement with Australia and in March of 2018 we signed a Treaty at the headquarters of the United Nations witnessed by Secretary-General Guterres.

After a hard-fought struggle – a struggle of undeniable, political and economic significance for our country – we delimited our maritime boundary with Australia.

With the signing of the maritime boundary treaty, the rights and responsibilities of Timor-Leste and Australia concerning the resources and activities within our respective sovereign territories were finally clarified.

For Timor-Leste, establishing jurisdiction over our maritime territory was inextricably bound to our sovereignty and to our prospects for the future.

Our long path to independence, which has required much courage and sacrifice from our people, could only be complete if we could exert our rights over that which belongs to us and set our own path towards development.

It meant the difference over everything involving the blue economy – the economy of

the sea. Tourism is a good example - the warm waters of Timor-Leste house coral reefs considered to be among the most well preserved in the world. In fact, Conservation International recently stated the waters surrounding the island of Atauro have the greatest biodiversity concentration in the entire world.

But it's also fisheries, maritime transportation, as well as strategic development opportunities in energy and mineral resources.

We are now on a path to move forward in these areas.

That's the good news I bring you. That's the opportunity.

But here's the bad news – and here lies the challenge for all of us.

Today, in a world full of conflict – do you know how many situations like Timor Leste remain unresolved?

Let this statistic sink in: there are more than 400 unresolved, outstanding maritime boundary disputes in the world today.

A large number of these are in some of the world's most sensitive geo-political areas, including in our region of Asia. These disputes are a real threat to global peace and security.

We are all here because we have faith in the potential to create more success stories. UNCLOS provides a framework for the peaceful resolution of maritime boundary disputes, but developing countries do not always enjoy effective and actual access to those mechanisms.

While all nations may be equal before the law, not all nations have equal access to the international legal system. Under-developed or developing countries, small or fragile nations often lack the institutional capacity and expertise to effectively use the international legal system.

From our experience with Australia, we learned the challenges developing countries can face when coming up against a richer and more powerful neighbour, even when they pretend to be a friend.

So, I hope this panel and this conference will see our success story not as a reason to celebrate, but more as a reason to take action.

Through the example of what we accomplished with Australia, we have provided proof that the rules-based architecture can still help achieve fairness, equity and more essentially, sovereignty.

Our story is one of hope. And so, we would be pleased to help any other country considering embarking on this process. Allow us to share our own experience and the lessons we have learnt.

And let's use this conference to promote a dialogue of new ideas and new commitments to again prove something to the world - to prove that we can do better, and that we can act with confidence.

Let Timor-Leste be an example of an effective rule of law and international justice system. If, many years ago, I told you that Timor-Leste would one day attend a conference like this one as a story of triumph rather than tears, a story of supremacy of justice over unlawful manoeuvres and deceitful behaviours, many would say I was dreaming.

My friend Nelson Mandela used to say, "people always call things impossible before they are done."

From 1975 to 1999, during the 24 years of difficult resistance against an illegal occupation by a big neighbour, helped by many western countries, it was shown that not many could believe we will even survive! And we proved they were wrong.

By applying the same spirit of resistance, commitment and determination, and by using the tools we have at our disposal in the international system, we achieved the impossible.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that we are here, with many of our direct and indirect supporters - proud and grateful that you stood beside us with the same commitment to make justice prevail. This kind of support outside of institutions is important because of its ability to influence the mindset of the decision makers.

Thank you and thanks to UNCLOS for having me here.