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MARITIME BOUNDARIES AND GOVERNMENT'S SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR
THE BLUE ECONOMY**

OPENING SESSION

BLUE TALKS

DILI

“Bridges to Lisbon: The 2022 United Nations Ocean Conference”

**SEMINAR: “PROMOTION AND STRENGTHENING OF SUSTAINABLE OCEAN-BASED
ECONOMIES: POTENTIAL OF THE SEA OF TIMOR-LESTE”**

“Perspectives on the biodiversity of the Sea of Timor-Leste”

**Portuguese Cultural Centre, Dili
8 June 2022**

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Presentation of the video titled “Dircia”
Presentation of the video titled “Adara”
Presentation of the video titled “Tutuala”
Presentation of the video titled “Sal”

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“Hau Nia Tasi, Hau Nia Timor”, “My Sea, My Timor”

These are the voices of our People. What you have just seen speaks for itself. It demonstrates the relationship between the sea and our people. The sea nourishes us; we nourish the sea!

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Your Excellency Ms Manuela Bairos, Portuguese Ambassador to Timor-Leste

Mr Roy Trivedy, UN Resident Coordinator

Ms Tuya Altangerel, UNDP Representative to Timor-Leste

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen

Dear friends,

Good afternoon!

I would like to start by thanking the Portuguese Ambassador to Timor-Leste – my dear friend Manuela Bairos – and the UNDP – represented here by Ms Tuya Altangerel – for jointly hosting this important Seminar on the potential of the Sea in Timor-Leste.

The sea is a core element in constructing the Timorese identity.

Legend has it that the Island of Timor was born out of friendship and a love of the sea. *“The legend says, and so and I believe (...) From the bottom of the sea a crocodile sought to chase its destiny through that sliver of light”* until it became the country that is Timor... *“Grandfather Crocodile – says the legend, and I believe it! It is Timor!”*

The sea is part of the history and culture of our Nation and the perception that the Timorese have of the world.

Thousands of years ago, different ethnic groups from the most diverse places in Asia and the South Pacific settled on our shores and, as others arrived, started moving deeper inland, onto the back of our grandfather crocodile.

As time went by they started moving from the coast into the interior. From fisherpeople we became farmers. Still, the connection between nature and the people living in our island was never lost. We are deeply connected to that which houses, creates and nourishes us, and even after we pass on we still remain present in the lives of the living.

Centuries ago, the sea also brought European navigators from distant Portugal. Upon entering through the calm waves of the Lifau beaches, they were awestruck by our native resources and beauty.

And while the sea set the bounds of our country’s territory, it was also the sea that provided easy access for a brutal invasion and an occupation that lasted a quarter century. The tears of agony cried by our people made the sea more salty than ever.

And yet the Timorese never lost faith, nor hope. The process that built our identity, resulting from a meeting of civilisations and cultures, also instilled in us an ideal of freedom that was to be the destiny of our People and our Homeland.

Thanks to many friends all over the world who advocated for the restoration of our independence, the Maubere miracle did ultimately come true.

As such, in these crossroads between Asia and the Pacific, there exists today a small but proud sovereign country, located between over 17 thousand islands in the neighbouring archipelago of Indonesia and the vast continent of Australia to the south.

Because our country is Portuguese-speaking, we share our cultural identity and language with eight other maritime nations.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

As we have seen, the sea is in the DNA of the Timorese. Perhaps that is why during the first years of our independence we felt incomplete. It was unacceptable to look at the sea that shaped the destiny of our nation, to feel the promise in its waves, and yet to see the international community not acknowledge our maritime jurisdiction over that very sea.

For a long time we sailed over murky waters with our neighbour Australia, trying to achieve a negotiated compromise on maritime boundaries.

Recently, making use of international law, we finally succeeded in establishing permanent maritime boundaries with Australia. We are presently holding talks with Indonesia seeking to achieve the same goal.

This is no more than guaranteeing our full sovereignty – both political and economic – so as to honour the sacrifices made for our people, many of whom died in the hope of a better future for their children.

Once our sea was very salty. Once it was murky. But now it is blue!

And so the time has come to look at our sea with a strategic vision, so that we may start thinking about the future.

The history of Timor-Leste is one of hope. In addition to petroleum resources, the sea of Timor also houses areas with the greatest concentration of biodiversity in the world, such as the waters around

Ataúro Island.

Therefore, if “Portugal is Sea”, then we can say that **Timor is TASI!** This is an acronym in Portuguese for a Timor that is Blue, Sustainable and Innovative.

Our proximity to the ocean gives us access to broad and rich biological, geological, mineral and geostrategic resources. This means that our economy and the sea are inseparable. Still, this interdependency must be managed in a manner that is balanced and, most importantly, sustainable.

This is the difference in all that entails the Blue Economy. **The Blue Economy seeks to utilise the ocean, as well as to protect it.** We are all aware that we are using resources at a much faster rate than nature can replenish them.

This means that biodiversity is facing very serious threats. This loss of biodiversity is a ticking time bomb: it is detrimental to the health of living beings, it hurts sustainable development and it makes climate change even worse.

And so, it is **urgent to balance economic activity and the long-term ability of ocean ecosystems** to support that activity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Like I said, in Timor-Leste we have coral reefs containing the greatest biodiversity in the world. We have warm waters and beautiful tropical beaches. We also have an annual migration of blue whales as well as so many beautiful dolphins along our coast that, in my opinion, is worthy of **establishing an International Centre of Cetacean Research and Control**, in partnership with international academic institutions.

Fishing is a vital activity for our subsistence economy. Some experts claim that the best tuna in the world spawns in our waters. However, the vastness of the seas makes it easy for foreign commercial fleets to carry out illegal fishing, which causes us severe economic and environmental

damage. We must put an end to this and we must **ensure the sustainability of the species of fish** being exploited in an out-of-control and illegal manner.

Tourism is another key industry for our economy. We must ensure that it is done in such a way as to attract tourists without sacrificing our biodiversity. We want to **develop tourism sustainably**, contributing to poverty reduction without lowering the quantity and diversity of our precious maritime resources.

This is why our communities follow **Tara Bandu, an ancestral practice that respects and protects our nature**, which is sacred to us. This traditional custom seeks both to manage our natural resources sustainably, as well as to contribute to the development of our communities.

Together with five other States, Timor-Leste is part of the Coral Triangle Initiative. We are working with our neighbours to protect maritime life and diversity. The Coral Triangle is an epicentre of diversity in terms of coral, fish and other marine organisms, representing around 3,000 species of fish and 76% of the types of coral in the world.

And yet, like many other areas throughout the world, so too is the Coral Triangle under threat. The ocean is becoming more acidic and warmer, and with less oxygen. Populations, economies and international trade are growing fast, which in turn leads to an increase in marine plastic and marine debris.

As in the case of climate change, it is urgent to make changes in order to mitigate the current trend of biodiversity loss and the terrible impacts it will have on humankind.

Responding to Madam Ambassador, who raised four very timely questions, I must state that we can no longer delay debate on how to improve the ability of Island States to have a development based on the Blue Economy.

This requires **investments that are both intelligent and adapted**

to local realities. It entails serious commitment, particularly by those wealthier nations that, in addition to having greater financial resources and stronger technologic and scientific abilities, are the ones that have been punishing our ocean the most, so that they adhere to a rule-based international order for the ocean. The United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, told countries to “bring plans, not just speeches”. I would like to add: **bring concrete and feasible programmes, not only pieces from international legislation.**

Timor-Leste is one of 38 Small Island Developing States – or, like we prefer to say, one of the Small States of the Vast Ocean. Although we are resilient, we are living in a time where climate change is a serious threat to our very survival. As such, we must waste no time in finding strategies to protect the ocean and its biodiversity, **by focusing on genuine alliances.**

We are linked to each other by the ocean and by common challenges. This bond must be heard by the International Community.

It is incomprehensible that there is not a stronger and unanimous international response for mitigating climate change, which compromises both the global development agenda and the safety of millions of people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We Timorese must improve the way in which we understand and use our sea. This requires wisdom and a great deal of respect. There are many opportunities for a blue development that safeguards and uses the sea responsibly.

And here we have good news and bad news!

The good news is that we are a “blank slate”, or better yet a “**blue slate**”. We have the opportunity to implement from scratch a blue economy that contributes to the development of current and future communities.

We can boost economic growth, job creation and food security through balanced economic activity that enables ocean ecosystems to replenish, thus protecting and preserving the seas and the ocean.

The bad news is that, despite all our efforts to establish maritime boundaries, **the issues leading to loss of biodiversity are global**. They are not stopped by national boundaries, much less maritime boundaries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As the Government's Special Representative for the Blue Economy, I can say that Timor-Leste **wants to play an active role** in the international arena, **particularly within the UN**, so as to promote and protect the ocean, as well as to ensure that maritime resources are managed responsibly. Timor-Leste advocates strengthening global governance towards this purpose.

Although we are aware of the challenges we face in protecting our biodiversity, we have concrete plans to do so, starting with greater awareness by our society. This entails **greater civic education on ocean issues**.

We want to start precisely with our children and young people, "*distributing breaths from the sea*"... This is a project that we will be announcing very soon, acknowledging that education is an important starting point for promoting the long-term construction of the blue economy.

And still, awareness by itself is not enough. We require a political, economic, social and cultural approach – **a changing of mindsets** – that once and for all changes the relationship between humans and nature.

Until then, **we are all responsible for being a part of this change!**

And now, because it is said that an image is worth a thousand words, I leave you with another video created by the Maritime Boundary Office, which is a presentation briefly summarising the way in which we envision a Blue Economy for Timor-Leste.

Thankyou very much.
Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão

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Presentation of the video titled “Timor Born from Blue”