

FOR someone who spent 24 years of his life as a small, unrecognised nation's lone voice in the international wilderness, it is not surprising that Jose Ramos-Horta has developed a bleak – but brutally realistic – view of war, peace and international politics.

“War will take its course with all the catastrophes that come with it, with all the human costs,” says the United Nations senior diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, when the conversation turns to the ongoing violence in Syria, Iraq and Libya. “It will stop eventually when everybody’s exhausted. Then, common sense might prevail and they’ll start talking.”

Mr Ramos-Horta, the former president of East Timor from 2007 to 2012, was in Singapore recently for a lecture organised by the Institute for Societal Leadership at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Since his exit from East Timor politics, he has been involved with work at the UN, most recently chairing a high level independent panel to review UN peace and security operations.

He was also marginally involved in a commission to reform the UN itself.

Established in 1945 to prevent another world war from happening again, the UN’s peacekeeping capabilities today are overstretched, he says. “The UN cannot allow itself to be dragged into every conflict situation, unless it is given a clear mandate, a very precise mandate, of what to achieve within how much time, and the tools to achieve it.”

While he thinks the UN is still an irreplaceable part of the world, he says that the organisation’s ability to maintain peace in the world is only as good as the commitments of its member states to provide professional troops in a timely manner.

But because of budget cuts and constraints on some of its most powerful members – the US notably not having paid its regular dues – the UN is under a lot of pressure, he says.

Meanwhile, Mr Ramos-Horta thinks the situation in the Middle East is the biggest threat to world peace today. “You see the influx of refugees into Europe. It does have social, political, security implications for the Europeans . . . the sad thing is all of this is happening in the midst of a worldwide economic and financial crisis.”

The influx of refugees has also destabilised neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, he says. But there is little that can be done to stop the civil wars raging in Libya, Syria and Iraq, he adds.

He points to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, which lasted eight years and caused a million casualties and included the use of chemical and biological weapons, as an example of the toothlessness of international organisations. “They sat down and talked, but only after eight years of war, not because of the UN or any miraculous mediator. They were just exhausted and they sued for peace.”

However, the current situation in Syria and Libya is far worse, he says. “As

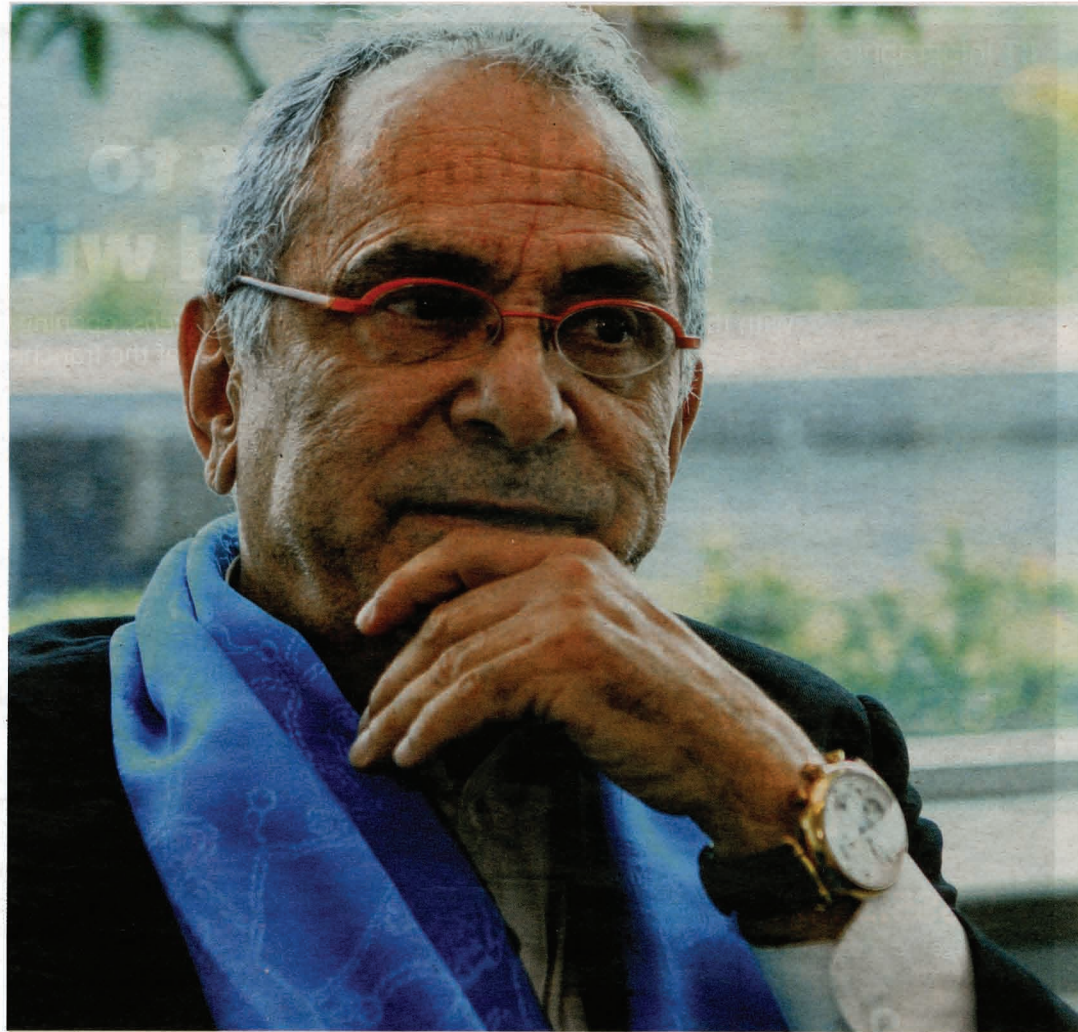


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Harsh truths of realpolitik

Jose Ramos-Horta, East Timor’s former president, says the fledgling nation is more politically stable than ever before, even though the world is not. **By Cai Haoxiang**

mad as the leaders were there, these states existed. They were still organised states with centralised authority. When they decided to stop war, war stopped.

“In Syria, who is going to decide what to stop? You have more than 100 armed groups there, you have mercenaries. Libya the state ceased to exist, if there ever was a state. I cannot in honesty tell you any positives.”

Turbulent past

The story of Mr Ramos-Horta’s life is one of privilege, struggle and extraordinary drama. He grew up in East Timor in the 1950s and 60s, the mixed-race son of a Portuguese father and a Timorese mother.

“In a backwater colony, a European,

no matter how dumb or illiterate, was considered a superior species. The son of a Portuguese *deportado*, even though his father was a dissident, had more advantages than the son of a native peasant,” he wrote in his 1987 book *Funu: The Unfinished Saga of East Timor*, a personal, self-admittedly biased account of the East Timor conflict.

Although the Portuguese had arrived on the island in the 16th century looking for spices and sandalwood, it was ruled by indigenous chiefs, and there were uprisings against the colonial masters. The Europeans managed to establish control over only the eastern part of the island in 1912, Mr Ramos-Horta wrote.

Unfortunately, peace did not last long.

East Timor was further devastated when the Japanese invaded in World War II, and was ignored by Portugal during the post-war period, he said.

“It was the dumping ground for political dissidents, failed professionals and incompetent bureaucrats. It was only in the 1960s that the capital city, Dili, was provided with electricity . . . by 1974, only a few main streets in Dili had been paved.”

Then came the Carnation Revolution in 1974, when Portugal’s authoritarian regime was overthrown and its colonial empire fell apart.

In East Timor, Mr Ramos-Horta, who wanted to be a journalist when he was a teenager, got involved in politics. He joined a nationalist group that eventually

became the political party Fretilin, short form in Portuguese for the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor.

Fretilin formed a coalition with another major party, UDT (Timorese Democratic Union), which fell apart. There was a short civil war between the two groups, which Fretilin won by September 1975.

At the same time, Indonesia feared that East Timor would become a base for communists and separatist movements.

As the threat of an Indonesian invasion loomed, the international world, notably Portugal, Australia and the US stood aside, Mr Ramos-Horta wrote.

The Cold War was on, the Soviets and Cubans were fighting a proxy war in Africa against the US, and the US had just been humiliated in Vietnam.

With anti-communist hysteria in South-east Asia, the US was supplying arms to Indonesia. It also had no credibility to tell Indonesia not to invade East Timor after their Vietnam debacle, Mr Ramos-Horta said in a 2012 Al-Jazeera interview with veteran TV host David Frost.

“We were sacrificed on the altar of pragmatism and realpolitik,” he said.

Fretilin unilaterally declared independence for the country at the end of 1975, with Mr Ramos-Horta made external relations minister at 25 years of age. At a Cabinet meeting, it was decided that he and a few other Fretilin leaders would go abroad. Mr Ramos-Horta ended up in New York to represent Fretilin’s cause at the UN.

Indonesian troops invaded East Timor soon after. Mr Ramos-Horta describes scenes of carnage in his book, with friends, women, men and children killed.

The long exile

Thus began, for Mr Ramos-Horta, a long and frustrating path of fighting for the independence cause as a diplomat.

He worked on draft resolutions calling attention to the issue and lobbied UN delegates to support his cause, finding sympathy in countries such as Algeria, Cuba, and China.

He also gave numerous talks. In an era without electronic media, he criss-crossed the US and Europe, Mr Ramos-Horta said in the Al-Jazeera interview with Mr Frost.

At a conference in Chicago, he recalled: “There were 12 ladies there. Each of them, at least 80 years old. And they were half asleep. But I would talk to them, anywhere, anyone who cared to listen.”

He lived in the Harlem neighbourhood in New York, wherever rent was cheap, supplementing his income with translation work from French, Spanish and Portuguese to English.

Financially, things got better after 1991 with the support of the Portuguese government, he said.

That was the year when hundreds of pro-independence demonstrators were killed by Indonesian troops in Dili’s Santa Cruz cemetery. Footage of the shooting was televised and sparked global outrage.

Still, East Timor’s independence cause

‘War will take its course with all the catastrophes that come with it, with all the human costs. It will stop eventually when everybody’s exhausted.’

JOSE RAMOS-HORTA

Former East Timor President, Nobel Peace laureate

Born in Dec 1949 in Dili, East Timor

1974: Advanced Diploma, Public Relations, Centro Internacional de Marketing

1975: East Timor declares independence following overthrow of dictatorship in Portugal, Indonesia attacks; Mr Ramos-Horta flies to New York as permanent representative of the East Timor resistance to the UN for the next 24 years

1984: Masters of Arts in Peace Studies, Antioch University, Ohio, USA

1996: Wins Nobel Peace Prize with Bishop Carlos Belo ‘for their work towards a just and peaceful solution to the conflict in East Timor’

1998: Suharto resigns as Indonesia President

2000: Cabinet member, United Nations Transition Administration for East Timor

2002: Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation

2006: Prime Minister and Minister of Defence

2007: President of East Timor

2012: Defeated in presidential election

2013: Special representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of the UN Integrated Peace Building Mission in Guinea-Bissau

2014: Chair of the high level independent panel on peace operations, to review UN peace and security mechanisms

2015: Member of Timor Leste Maritime Council

remained as hopeless as ever. It was estimated that at least 100,000 people died between 1974 and 1999, including tens of thousands of killings and the rest from starvation and illness.

It was not until the Suharto regime collapsed in 1998 that the East Timorese got their chance to vote against being part of Indonesia, in a referendum the following year.

As Indonesian soldiers withdrew, militias destroyed most of the country, with widespread violence, rape and looting.

Violence continues

After a transitional UN government, East Timor became independent in 2002, with Mr Ramos-Horta becoming foreign minister.

Unfortunately, the country remained politically turbulent. In 2006, a conflict within the military over discrimination is-

sues led to violence and the deployment of international troops.

Guerrillas continued to operate out of the mountains. In 2008, a confrontation involving one of the rebel leaders, Alfredo Reinado, who tried to enter Mr Ramos-Horta’s home while the latter was out for a walk, ended with Mr Reinado being shot dead and Mr Ramos-Horta later being shot at and badly injured by one of Mr Reinado’s men.

The incident, which has been shrouded in controversy, had been reported by some media as an assassination attempt.

But when asked by *The Business Times*, Mr Ramos-Horta says that he does not believe he was a target. Mr Reinado was an unstable and undisciplined character who was fired from the army and tried to challenge the leadership, he says.

“I tried to negotiate, always listening, always meeting with him to pacify the situation. And I was hoping to work out a compromise whereby he’d return, not return to the army but return to the capital and would be pardoned off.”

That fateful day on Feb 11, 2008, Mr Ramos-Horta recalls, he was out exercising while Mr Reinado came to his house uninvited. A couple of Mr Ramos-Horta’s security guards were asleep or half-asleep and were quickly disarmed, he says wryly.

“But there was a third one, who was more attentive, saw him, said that’s Reinado. He didn’t hesitate, aimed the gun, incredible sharpshooter from quite a distance of 20 metres or more, hit him in one single bullet in his eye. All hell broke loose,” he says.

His security team engaged in a firefight with Mr Reinado’s men. When Mr Ramos-Horta heard the shooting, he walked up to his home and was shot.

“When I was shot, the rest of the group was totally bewildered about what happened. Because in public statements, Mr Reinado was saying the only leader in this country he trusts is Mr Ramos-Horta, he’s the one not involved in any of this crisis situation,” he says.

Mr Ramos-Horta survived the shooting, though he lost more than four litres of blood. Within days of the shooting, the rebel group of around 20 people said they would surrender to Mr Ramos-Horta, which they did. And later on, Mr Ramos-Horta would go on to pardon the rebels after they were sentenced to jail.

“Today, I believe I was not a target for assassination. But it was imprudent on the part of Mr Reinado to have come to my place and take aggressive actions . . . disarming my security. You do that at the gate of the Singapore President, you do that at the gate of the White House, the marines will fire at you, so that’s what happened.”

“If he had come there, and waited outside, politely waited and asked to see me, I would have seen him as I have so many times before.”

Relative stability

Since 2008, the violence has largely stopped, Mr Ramos-Horta says. The government and the opposition have worked

well together, he adds.

He estimates unemployment to be under 9 per cent. Most people are involved in agriculture. Organic coffee is a major export.

People are investing. A South Korean builder and an Australian company are investing several hundred millions of dollars in a cement factory that will be built next year, he says. Dutch brewer Heineken is building a beer factory, while a big resort is being started by a Timorese Chinese, he notes. East Timor also has commodities such as marble and manganese, a component for the steel industry, he says.

Yet, in his view, the country is still too dependent on its oil and gas revenues, a problem in an era of depressed oil prices. The nation has saved some revenue in a petroleum fund that was valued at US\$14.9 billion at end-2013 and which earns 3-4 per cent of returns annually, based on the fund’s last available annual report.

If oil and gas revenues completely run out, the fund will be depleted quite quickly, Mr Ramos-Horta says.

“We talk often about diversifying the economy but diversification does not happen by talking about it. And it takes time to build alternatives,” he says, noting that tourism is a possibility, along with manufacturing.

As for corruption issues, Mr Ramos-Horta says that while outright stealing is not possible, there could still be issues such as contractors inflating their prices.

“The good news is our courts are becoming more assertive and a few people have landed in jail. Now, many are scared. I know some in jail and they are crying.”

As for the nation’s troubled past, notably the 1999 destruction of the country, it will take some time before justice can be delivered, he says.

Here, Mr Ramos-Horta is pragmatic. While there was pressure from international civil society groups to set up an international tribunal to indict people for war crimes, East Timor did not think a tribunal would serve its interests. Reconciliation is preferred.

“Knowing Indonesia, and the various forces at play at the time, competing for power, we would end up contributing to further destabilisation of Indonesia,” he says. “Justice will happen, will take its course . . . Indonesia has changed a lot since 1998, 1999.”

Next year, an international centre for dialogue and reconciliation currently under construction in East Timor will be ready. Sponsored by both countries, the centre will allow both countries to share their experience with countries in the region and the world.

“I have often told our people that the greatest gift for us, the greatest justice is the delivery of freedom. And the international community contributed to that. The Indonesian people contributed to that. They are the ones who ousted Suharto, not us.”

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