

**Address by Mr Dermot Ahern, T.D. Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ireland to a
Special Session of the Parliament of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste**

21 February 2008

I am honoured to respond to your warm welcome to this Special Session of the Parliament of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste and to affirm on behalf of the Parliament as well as the Government and People of Ireland the cherished place that has long been in our hearts for the people of Timor Leste.

At the first opportunity, we in Ireland sought to help Timor Leste as you struggled for freedom and independence. With your freedom won, we have sought to assist in the creation of your state and the development of your society. I am here this morning to renew our commitment to you in this the Peoples House – at the very heart of your young democracy - as you advance toward the peace and prosperity that the people of this beautiful island nation so richly deserve.

I wish to convey also the deep concern we in Ireland have felt at the recent events here. They were a tragic reminder of how difficult it is to make the transition from conflict to stability, a difficulty with which in we in Ireland are all too familiar.

I would like to convey my best wishes to your President and his family for a speedy recovery. Timor Leste needs his leadership, alongside that of the Government and of this Assembly, to steer a clear course through the current difficulties.

For of one truth I have no doubt - that with unity of purpose and a clear commitment to harmony as well as to parliamentary democracy and to the rule of law, Timor Leste will secure a bright future for all its people.

I do not underestimate the difficulties you face. The challenges are many. But neither do I doubt your ability to make progress nor the resolve of the international community to stand with you.

In Ireland we too know the value of international solidarity as we made our own journey from colonisation and poverty to freedom and prosperity. It is that collective experience that has shaped the Irish people. It is that collective knowledge that allows us to empathise with the struggle of Timor Leste.

Indeed both our countries and peoples are part of the great narrative of the twentieth century nationalist struggle for independence and the harsh challenges of post-colonial freedom.

In coming to terms with that freedom, as an old nation but a new state, we in Ireland faced the challenges of restoring social harmony, achieving economic development and finding acceptance within the international community. We joined the League of Nations, the United Nations and the then European Community. From the 1960s onwards, and partly utilising the Irish emigrant community's success in the United States, we actively sought foreign direct investment to build our economy.

If Ireland is now known as the Celtic Tiger for its success, for many years we were tragically better known for the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The roots of the Northern Ireland conflict lay in our history. Ireland's struggle lasted some 800 years. Throughout that long saga, Ireland's narrative combined many strands and divisions, primarily of native and settler, Catholic and Protestant, nationalist and unionist, British and Irish.

Those strands took their hue and texture from the often contested views of the same events – and from these differences there emerged conflicts that passed from one generation to the next. Indeed, we can now measure the achievement of our peace process against this long and complex historical narrative.

Today, one of the great joys of living through this historic time in the story of Ireland and her people is that our generation can pass to our successors an island at peace, an island that has broken the cycle of violence and set aside the bitterness of the past – an island that now looks resolutely and confidently to the future.

It took the sustained partnership of my Government and that of Britain, assisted by a range of international governments but particularly the United States, to resolve the Northern Ireland conflict. If we endured 30 years of conflict, we also experienced 30 years of efforts to resolve that conflict.

That long and collective effort at conflict resolution resulted in the historic breakthrough in 1998 of the Good Friday Agreement – and then we faced the challenge of translating its noble words into the realities of community reconciliation.

The formation last year of a stable Government in Northern Ireland and the inauguration of a new era in cooperation between Ireland, North and South, offers the prospect of a lasting peace on our island based on mutual respect and reconciliation.

After reflecting on this experience, I came to the belief that Ireland may well have learned some important lessons and that, if we did, we ought to share them. And share not just the lessons of the Northern Ireland peace process but of what it takes to resolve conflict generally. No one has all the answers. But collectively we can do things better to resolve conflict and build lasting peace.

I therefore established conflict resolution as a new initiative in Ireland's engagement with the wider world.

And I am happy and proud to say that the Government of Timor-Leste has accepted our offer, the first of its kind, to enhance our relations by working with us in sharing these experiences and lessons of our two countries.

We do not come with ready answers. We come only with the willingness to listen and to share. And the hope that if we can in any way assist Timor-Leste, that the lessons of your situation may also help us as we move forward in dealing with the legacy of our own conflict.

For if the experience of colonisation and division has taught us anything, it is that only solutions grounded in the people and their leadership endure and thrive. Destiny must reside in the hearts and minds of the people. We learned other lessons too:

- That we must be inclusive of all views and accepting of the perspectives of others.
- That only dialogue and politics can provide enduring solutions.
- That society can only thrive with the rule of law, respect for human rights and equality.
- That building peace means devoting energy and commitment to achieving effective and accountable policing, confidence in the administration of justice and fairness in employment, housing and social inclusion.

No two conflicts are the same. But the roots of conflict and conversely the foundations for peace often share common features. Through sharing lessons, experiences and indeed unresolved questions, we can advance the cause of peace.

To assist our two countries in enhancing this exchange, I am proud to announce that I have appointed, and your Government has accepted, a Roving Ambassador, Ms Nuala O'Loan, as our Special Envoy to Timor Leste. She is a widely admired and respected figure who has made a significant contribution to the implementation of the Northern Ireland peace process.

Working with our esteemed Ambassador, Richard O'Brien and the enterprising head of our Development Mission here in Dili, Charles Lathrop, I look forward to her advice and guidance on how we can deepen the relationship between us and our support for you.

We could not, of course, be strengthening our existing ties if we had not already established a solid partnership. This has been achieved through the contribution made by our Irish peacekeepers – and I pause to recall the memory of Private Peadar Ó Flaithearta who gave his life in the establishment of your young democracy - and through the efforts of the many others from Ireland who came to help transform the lives of the people of this land.

Through the efforts of so many people, but in particular, those of my friend and compatriot Tom Hyland, the cause of Timor-Leste was actively brought to public and political attention in Ireland. Tom Hyland has been constant and relentless in his efforts to help Timor-Leste. He campaigned tirelessly and effectively. For many people in Ireland, Tom put Timor Leste on the map. I want to acknowledge his contribution and pay tribute to his work and I am delighted that he is with us today.

Mr. Acting President,

Ireland's official aid programme, Irish Aid, has garnered an enviable international reputation for the quality of its work and for its clear focus on reducing poverty, on building capacity and promoting true partnership. We have no hidden agendas.

Our aid is untied. Our aim is to work in partnership to transform the lives of communities, and indeed nations, for the better.

Ireland opened a representative office in Dili in November 2000. Timor Leste was designated a priority country for our aid programme in 2003. In the programme which we have designed together we want to build local capacity and deliver a range of basic services. Together we are determined to see quality education, health, water and sanitation come within the reach of all. We will continue to work closely together on these important objectives by ensuring that you are in the "driving seat" of your own development agenda.

I know that we both believe in the importance of good governance and a strong civil society. Both are vital in creating the fabric of a stable and prosperous nation. We will continue to work with you in building institutions of excellence, based on best practice, in partnership with civil society organisations working in the community.

Under the leadership of the United Nations and with the assistance of the European Union, the international community has rallied to your cause and demonstrated its commitment to assisting you in creating the conditions for peace and prosperity. It is an opportunity not only to be prized but to be seized.

The people of Timor-Leste have also the enduring support and friendship of a number of countries, near and far, including Australia, Indonesia, Portugal, New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom, Cuba, Mozambique and Norway. Their kinship and contribution in good times and in bad is to be acknowledged and admired.

Mr Acting President,

The triumph of hope over history has been a recurring theme in our collective efforts in peacemaking and peacebuilding in Ireland. Our greatest living poet and Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, put it thus:

History says, Don't hope

On this side of the grave.

But then, once in a lifetime

The longed-for tidal wave

Of Justice can rise up,

And hope and history rhyme. Seamus Heaney (1991)

Timor-Leste has made great progress towards that time when hope and history rhyme. Justice demands no less.

I am confident that Timor-Leste will continue on the historic path towards the social and economic destiny which its people both demand and deserve.

Today I pledge to you – as I did at the outset of these remarks - that Ireland, working with the international community - in partnership with the friends of Timor-Leste, will continue and indeed enhance its support for your efforts and ambitions.

On behalf of my Government and the people of Ireland, I look to our enduring partnership and to the bright future of the people of Timor Leste.

Thank you