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Speech of Manfred Nowak at the Inauguration of the Human Rights Centre at the National University of Timor Leste Dili



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Dili, 27 August 2019

"Excellencies, Friends of the Human Rights Centre, colleagues, students, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very delighted and proud that we will today officially inaugurate the Human Rights Centre within the Faculty of Social Sciences at the National University of Timor Leste (UNTL)! This is indeed a remarkable achievement which was only possible thanks to a close cooperation with many different stakeholders. It was only in December 2018 that the Global Campus of Human Rights was signing a contract with the European Union, which is generously funding this ambitious project aimed at the “Development of Human Rights Education and Research at UNTL”. I am particularly grateful to DEVCO and H.E. Alexandre Leitao, EU Ambassador in Timor Leste, for his inspiration and support.

One month later, we conducted an assessment mission to DILI and at the end of these ten days, I signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the magnificent Rector of UNTL, Professor Francisco Miguel Martins. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to you for all your support during the first phase of implementing our joint project! During our assessment mission in January, we established valuable contacts with many important international and domestic institutions and received most enthusiastic support from the United Nations country team led by Resident Coordinator Roy Trivedy, the Government of Timor Leste, represented by the Minister of Higher Education, H.E. Longuinhos dos Santos, by members of the Parliament, the Provedora Nina Gomes, various leading civil society organisations, the academic community and the international community. I am most honoured that H.E., Dr. Jose Ramos Horta, whom I have known for decades from our common activities in Geneva during the independence struggle, agreed from the very beginning to become a friend and supporter of the Human Rights Centre and to also deliver a keynote speech today. Last but not least, we would not assemble here today without the tireless efforts, dedication and diplomatic skills of our project manager, Adriano Remiddi, and his excellent team!

Why is it important to establish a Human Rights Centre at the UNTL? Why is it symbolic to inaugurate this Centre in the context of the official celebrations 20 years after the historic UN Popular Consultation in which the Timorese people had opted with an overwhelming majority for the independence of their country?

This young nation was born as a result of the struggle of their people for the right to self determination, for freedom, human rights and democracy. Many of the leaders and politicians of Timor Leste are themselves human rights defenders and activists. During their struggle for independence, the people of Timor Leste have suffered some of the worst violations of human rights you can imagine. The struggle for human rights is, therefore, deeply rooted in the civil society and academic community of Timor Leste, it constitutes part of the DNA of this country. Nevertheless, human rights as something which makes communities safe, development just, and peace sustainable is not well developed and rooted as an academic field of research and teaching in the curriculum of its schools and universities.

Yesterday, I participated in a highly inspiring panel discussion on “Timor Leste’s Journey of Truth, Justice and Reconciliation” at the Centre Nacional Chega. We all agreed that Timor Leste has done more than most other countries in a similar situation, to openly address the gross and systematic human rights violations of the past, to objectively establish the truth, to provide some form of justice and reparation to the victims and to engage in a process of reconciliation. Truth, justice and reconciliation are the most important preconditions for a sustainable peace based upon democracy, the rule of law and human rights! It seems logical that these remarkable achievements of developing a genuine human rights culture need to be supplemented by a solid human rights focus, capacity and infrastructure at the UNTL! The young generation of Timor Leste shall be empowered to study the theory and practical skills of human rights in order to further develop and strengthen the human rights culture in their country!

Thanks to the initiative and financial support of the European Union, the Global Campus of Human Rights is supporting the UNTL and its nine faculties to develop the expertise necessary to establish and maintain an interdisciplinary Human Rights Centre within the Faculty of Social Sciences. In this respect, I wish to also express my deep gratitude to the Dean of this Faculty, Professor Camilo Ximenes, for his openness and support! The Global Campus of Human Rights, consisting of some 100 universities in all world regions, is the largest network of postgraduate human rights education worldwide. We are jointly organising seven regional Master programmes in all continents, including the Asia-Pacific Master based at Mahidol University in Bangkok. I am grateful to my colleagues at Mahidol University, above all Mike Hayes and Bencharat Sae Chua, for providing students and professors from the UNTL with high quality education in Bangkok and for having enrolled the first six students and practitioners of Timor Leste in the Asia-Pacific Master programme. Four lecturers from UNTL having already received academic training on teaching human rights at Mahidol University. It is our vision that these students and professors, after having completed their studies in Bangkok and other universities participating in the Asia-Pacific Master, will form the core faculty of our Human Rights Centre and will already in 2021 be in a position to offer a first Bachelor programme in human rights in Timor Leste. In the longer term, we hope to also start an own Master programme at UNTL which should enable this university to finally join the Asia-Pacific Master Program and become a member of the Global Campus of Human Rights!

We will only succeed with these ambitious goals if we can also count in the future on the active support of many different stakeholders from Timor Leste and the international community. To this end, we will establish a network of “Friends of the Human Rights Centre”, and I am appealing to international organisations, governments (above all in the ASEAN region), development agencies and other donors as well as the corporate sector and outstanding individuals to join the “Friends of the Human Rights Centre”! Together, we will make the Centre a lively and dynamic place of teaching, research and intellectual exchange! The people of Timor Leste truly deserve to be provided with such an exciting opportunity!

I thank you for your attention.

Manfred Nowak"

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