

GABINETE DO PRIMEIRO-MINISTRO

Dili, 8 February 2007

Media Alert

We send below an opinion article by Prime Minister Dr. José Ramos-Horta published on today's edition of newspaper Suara Timor Lorosae.

Anti-Cuba propaganda hurts Timor-Leste's best interests

By Jose RAMOS-HORTA
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate
Prime Minister

I am writing this in response to an on-going campaign in certain quarters against our country's policies in regard to Cuba, in particular, on the issue of our students studying medicine in Cuba and of Cuban doctors serving in Timor-Leste.

This major program between TL and Cuba was first discussed in Kuala Lumpur between President Fidel Castro, President Xanana Gusmao and me on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in 2003. Fidel Castro offered to take 50 students. President Xanana did not hesitate and grabbed the opportunity. The program increased with visits to Cuba by former PM Dr. M. Alkatiri and me in the following years. So this is not an ill-conceived or an ideologically-motivated program to train "revolutionaries". Our students are doing very well in their studies under the rigorous Cuban academic discipline, having time off only on Sundays when our students, all devout Catholics flock to the Churches.

Those who have known me over the years do know that my ideological and political views are center-left, never too much in the left, never too much in the right. In few words, I never ever espoused Marxism, and least of all Communism. I was raised a Catholic and continue to adhere to the Christian faith and have profound respect and affection for the Pope and my Bishops even if I do not attend Mass every Sunday.

In 30 years I visited Cuba twice, first in 1977 on the occasion of an international youth conference. I did not meet with any Cuban official then. I was young, unimportant, and irrelevant in world affairs. But I had fun socializing with other visitors, from Australia, Japan and some rare leftists from the US and Canada.

My second visit took place in June 2005. I found Havana even more decrepit than 30 years earlier and Cubans no poorer or better. But Varadero is today a major tourist destination with an estimated 2 million tourists visiting Cuba each year. They are mostly from Canada, Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, Europe and Japan. And of course Cuba is worth visiting. Apart from the beaches, rum, music and the famous Cuban cigar (ask Bill Clinton about it), I believe what fascinates many people most is Fidel Castro's enigma and the much romanticized Cuban Revolution.

Am I one of the many admirers of Fidel Castro? Do I romanticize about "Revolutions"? I do have a giant poster of El Che hung in my house next to posters of John F. Kennedy,

Marlon Brando, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Humphrey Bogart and Chairman Mao. I collect the posters that remind me of an epoch, the great sixties. I would never though have a poster of Hitler or Osama Bin Laden in my office or home.

My heart sunk when I visited Havana in June 2005. The dilapidated city is symbolic of a failed economic experiment. I cannot understand why the Cuban leadership does not follow the more pragmatic policies of their Chinese and Vietnamese comrades who have maintained a tight political regime but have opened up economically. Their peoples' living standards improved dramatically in only few years.

Fidel Castro and the "Cuban Revolution" are intertwined with Latin America's tragic relationship with their superpower neighbor. Understanding the past relationship of the US with Latin America - a history filled with invasions, overthrow of elected governments, support for brutal and corrupt dictators - can explain the resentment and anger in Cuba and elsewhere towards the US. The Cold War that pitted the US and the USSR against each other made things worse for everybody, for the US as it made American leaders even more intolerant of social movements, and for Latin Americans who became even more victimized by their rulers and their rulers' American patron.

The Cuban Lion is in his winter. His legacy for the Cuban people and for much of Latin America is enormous and that is not quantifiable in material terms. He dared to stand up to the superpower and brought pride and dignity to his people. There are no millionaires in Cuba but there is no abject poverty either as there is in many capitalist nations in Latin America and in American cities. Malnutrition, TB, malaria and illiteracy have long been wiped out in Cuba.

Under Fidel Castro, Cuba has "exported" tens of thousands of doctors to Latin America, Africa and Asia, working in slums and in such precarious conditions that only 19th century missionaries used to endure. Fidel Castro also dispatched troops to fight anti-colonial battles in Africa to free Africans from Western colonialists. Thousands of Cuban troops were sent to fight in Angola in 1975 as Angola was invaded by the powerful South African apartheid army. The US and the USSR too invaded countless countries, overthrowing regimes, setting up new ones to their liking. It was the Cold War.

Nelson Mandela and Gabriel Garcia Marquez are some of the illustrious names who are fond of Fidel Castro. Pope John Paul II visited Cuba in 1998 and hundreds of thousands attended the many masses celebrated by the Pope. When he passed away, Cuba was the only country in the world that observed seven days of official mourning instead of the customary three days.

There are now 700 E Timorese studying medicine in Cuba; an additional 105 are studying Medicine in T-L under Cuban doctors' guidance. Some 230 Cuban doctors are working in our country, in simple, precarious conditions, accepting the hardship with the same dedication we see only in our own priests and nuns.

Our students study medicine and only medicine. Of course they study Spanish and Cuban History. They are doing very well, doing better than students from some 30 other nations. Our students are devout Catholics and never miss the Sunday mass. I have also proposed to our Bishops that they send a chaplain to attend to the spiritual needs of our students and the T-L government would pay for all the costs. We want our students to continue to be able to practice their faith and attend mass if they so choose.

The number of our students studying medicine in Cuba and in T-L under Cuban doctors'

guidance will increase to 1,000. If, in five to 10 years, all or at least half succeed in completing their medical training, T-L will have resolved one of our most serious problems and that is our lack of medical doctors.

T-L is grateful to Cuba for this extraordinary generosity. It does not mean that other countries are doing less. Portugal has also offered hundreds of scholarships to our students over many years and has currently many teachers residing and working in our country. We are eager to offer our youth a chance to go abroad to study wherever possible without being paranoid about the potential political or cultural influence they will absorb. In T-L we have had dozens of American Peace Corps volunteers working in remote communities in precarious conditions. Unfortunately they were ordered to leave in May 2006, understandably so, because of the political crisis and violence in our capital. I and my good friend Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) were responsible for pushing for the Peace Corps program in T-L. The point I am trying to make is that T-L, as a poor emerging nation, is eager to learn from all our friends, to receive with humility and gratitude their generous help to educate our youth, to train our people, no matter the political system in each country.

Let us be open-minded, free ourselves from the idiotic and provincial mentality shaped by our geographic isolation and the Cold War propaganda of a by-gone era. Let us be smart, pragmatic and grab every opportunity we can to learn from others. I hope that this clarifies once and for all the issue of our relationship with Cuba.