

# THE SATURDAY PAPER

NEWS

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## Q&A with international peacemaker José Ramos-Horta

At the forefront of Timor-Leste's fight for independence, José Ramos-Horta remains an active figure in world politics. He shares his thoughts on Kevin Rudd, hypocrisy over maritime borders and making another bid for the Timorese presidency.



HAMISH MCDONALD

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José Ramos-Horta.

SEYLLLOU / AFP

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**J**osé Ramos-Horta helped set up Timor-Leste's leftist Fretilin party as Portuguese rule collapsed in 1974-75, then went into 24 years of exile when Indonesia invaded and annexed the former colony. His diplomatic campaign for self-determination earned him a Nobel peace prize with Bishop Carlos Belo in 1996 and then saw fruit with the referendum in 1999 that ended Indonesia's occupation. Ramos-Horta became the new nation's first foreign minister in 2002, its prime minister after a breakdown of security four years later, and then its president from 2007-12, coming close to death at one point when ambushed and shot by rebels. Recently he's sorted out another former Portuguese colony in West Africa, and advised the United Nations on peacekeeping. When Dili's current leaders are at loggerheads they come to him – he recently brokered a compromise about extending the appointment of the armed forces chief –

and he's under pressure to run again for the presidency early next year when former guerilla leader Taur Matan Ruak steps down to lead a new party in legislative elections. Now 66, Ramos-Horta works on his fitness at his traditional-style home and receives a constant stream of visitors from local institutions. He's also on his phone and email to influential world figures, including Kevin Rudd, whose bid to become the new UN secretary-general he supported.

**Hamish McDonald** Are you under-employed?

**José Ramos-Horta** I am fully employed. In Guinea-Bissau [West Africa] as special UN envoy I managed to persuade its military to go back to barracks and help set conditions for new elections with a fair result, and then became member of a panel reviewing UN peace operations for the secretary-general.

**HM** What was your finding?

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**JRH** There are many flaws: different quality of troops and equipment among contributing countries, disagreement in the Security Council that hinders early deployment of troops –it takes up to nine months from any decision to get troops on the ground – and an unclear chain of command, so that UN force commanders have limited authority to take preventive action or forceful reaction to protect civilians.

Sometimes a force commander has divided loyalty between the UN and his home defence chiefs, especially when troops from his own country are at risk. We made over 100 recommendations, including creation of a new deputy secretary-general for peace operations, how to take more preventive action, and when that fails, more timely intervention with adequate troops and equipment, a clear mandate, and a clear exit plan.

**HM** How would that work with say South Sudan or the Congo?

**JRH** South Sudan has reached a stage where you really need a coalition of the willing, authorised by the UN Security Council, led by countries jointly, let's say the US and South Africa, maybe also Ethiopia. Countries that have more disciplined, effective fighting forces to really occupy the main towns and take forceful action to neutralise the rebels. Plus stiff sanctions for any neighbouring country that tries to undermine the UN mission: the problems in South Sudan and the Congo are not entirely internal. South Sudan's two rival leaders, the president and the vice-president, have to be called to account, including indictment for war crimes and crimes against humanity, if they continue to behave the way they have been.

**HM** Does the UN secretariat itself need drastic reform and streamlining?

**JRH** Definitely. The secretary-general for the next five or 10 years must be someone with impeccable

political and diplomatic credentials, a charismatic individual, a good communicator who can inspire member states and civil society. The secretary-general's power doesn't come from troops and weapons. He or she is a bit like the Pope, ideally like the current Pope, Francis. This kind of secretary-general could discipline the UN secretariat to be more productive, less wasteful, and more field oriented. When you look at the bureaucracies comfortably installed in New York, Geneva, Rome and Paris, it is unacceptable: they have zero sensitivity, zero care about people whom the UN are supposed to serve. People who are eternally in headquarters, steadily growing less productive and committed, should be sent to the field.

**HM** And you strongly supported Kevin Rudd for that job?

**JRH** There are a number of exceptional candidates. António Guterres, the former prime minister of Portugal and UN high commissioner for refugees, would be the most popular right now. Kevin Rudd ... would be a formidable secretary-general. But all of them who are not from Eastern Europe, no matter their qualifications and their charisma, face a great hurdle: Moscow. It has insisted that (a) this is the turn of Eastern Europe and (b) that it will veto any candidate from a NATO country or perceived to be too close to Washington. So it's highly unlikely Rudd or Guterres would satisfy Moscow. But the Russians are not going to find too many Eastern Europeans who are not in NATO. So in the end, the Russians and the Americans in particular will agree on a compromise candidate who might not necessarily be from Eastern Europe.

**HM** Kevin Rudd's familiarity with world affairs and leaders is superb, but his Australian image is one of counterproductive hyperactivity as a leader. Does that resonate outside Australia?

**JRH** Sometimes my brothers and friends in Australia think that anything Australians think has an enormous impact on the rest of the world. I have to beg to disagree with that. World leaders who have dealt with Kevin Rudd have a very different appreciation of him than the folks in the western suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne. So I do not think this would matter much. Kevin Rudd gained positive notoriety at least on two major areas: foreign aid, where Australia significantly increased its contribution and effectiveness, and on climate change.

**HM** What is driving Timor-Leste in its campaign to reopen maritime boundary negotiations with Australia?

**JRH** Xanana Gusmão [as the first president of Timor-Leste] was never very supportive of the 2002 and 2006 treaties on the oil and gas fields. His opportunity to challenge them arose when it was found out that through those critical negotiations, through an Australian aid project, Canberra was bugging our offices. He had also lost patience with Canberra and the oil companies over the refusal to even consider the possibility of a pipeline coming to Timor-Leste. Now it's become absolutely ridiculous to hear Australia urging China to abide by law in the South China Sea when it withdrew from the jurisdiction of the international courts on maritime boundaries. When you play by a hypocritical double standard, it will catch up with you one day. When Julie Bishop talks about China having to abide by international law, it's

almost like Imelda Marcos speaking out about corruption in the shoe industry. That doesn't mean agreement to shift the boundary to the median line [between the two coasts] would resolve all of Timor-Leste's development problems.

**HM** Given your statement about South Sudan, do you have regrets about TL post-independence not seeking trials for Indonesia's abuses during the occupation?

**JRH** Absolutely no regrets, quite the opposite. Time has confirmed my belief 15 years ago that Indonesia needed time to consolidate democracy and reform its armed forces. And Indonesia welcomed and accepted our olive branch. They could have turned their backs and shown bitterness over our breakaway. But they have done everything possible to help stabilise Timor-Leste. Our border is one of the safest anywhere in the world. Our students continue to go to Indonesia and they are extremely well treated, with zero discrimination. Timorese who stayed on in Indonesia continue to serve in the army, police or anywhere.

**HM** Are you tempted to jump back into Timorese politics?

**JRH** I've been approached to run again for the presidency, or to join one of the major parties in the legislative elections for a possible senior ministerial portfolio. But I haven't made up my mind. I'm still thinking. Nor do I want to go off on another lengthy UN mission. I prefer to stay home, in any capacity, including in an entirely independent, civilian, and non-public role.

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**HAMISH MCDONALD**

is *The Saturday Paper's* world editor.