

La'o Hamutuk

Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis

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2 April 2026

La'o Hamutuk appreciates Government's intention to cancel the Pelican Paradise project¹

La'o Hamutuk appreciates the announcement by the Government of Timor-Leste to cancel the Pelican Paradise project. This decision comes in a context where the project has not progressed proportional to its initial scale and promise, while at the same time raising concerns about sustainability, corruption, violations of community rights, transparency and financial risk.

La'o Hamutuk considers this decision important to protect Timor-Leste's long-term interests, maintain institutional integrity and strengthen accountability in managing foreign investment. We encourage the Government to continue to strengthen rigorous prevention to protect Timor-Leste's people and interests.

Since this project started in 2009, there were many problematic signs, but the proponent and the Government ignored them. In September 2009, the owner of the project, Singaporean² Edward Ong, tried to scam more than a billion dollars from Timor-Leste's Petroleum Fund, through a company called "Asian Champ Investment".³ Six months later, workers discovered nine corpses (probably victims from Indonesia's occupation) at the project site. However, Ong planned to open a golf course by 2012.⁴ In 2014, the environmental authority informed La'o Hamutuk that the project was cancelled, although it already had received an environmental license.⁵ Timor-Leste should learn from this experience, and not trust investors or projects with indicators of bad faith.

Pelican Paradise restarted in 2018, when the Government approved a Special Investment Agreement (SIA) proposal of approximately \$310 million. In 2019, the project increased to approximately \$700 million in the areas of Tasi-Tolu and Tibar with an area of 558 hectares, with the aim of developing a tourist complex with a five star hotel, golf course and other infrastructure. In 2021, through Government Resolution 133/2021, the State of Timor-Leste approved the project and the SIA, showing continuing institutional responsibility to the

¹ Iha lingua Tetum: <https://www.laohamutuk.org/econ/corruption/pelican/260402LH%20Komunikadu%20kona-ba%20Governu%20kansela%20projetu%20Pelican%20ParadiseTe.pdf>

² An earlier version of this statement incorrectly characterized Ong as Malaysian. La'o Hamutuk regrets our error.

³ <https://www.laohamutuk.org/Oil/PetFund/ACI/10AsianChampInvestment.htm>

⁴ https://golfnewsstoriesonline.com/news/all/golf_news/east_timor_to_be_home_for_new_golf_resort.html

⁵ <https://laohamutuk.blogspot.com/2014/05/environmental-licensing-who-needs-it.html>

investor.⁶ However, during the following years, project implementation did not show significant progress; they only continued to renew its environmental license.⁷ Audit Report 1/2024 by Timor-Leste's Chamber of Accounts identified problems with rent exemptions granted to Pelican Paradise.⁸

Pelican Paradise invested in education by launching an international school in Dili, known as Pelican Grammar School, which opened in January 2024. In 2025, the company asked the State to deposit about \$180 million. Finally, on 23 March 2026 the Government announced its intention to cancel the project, although the company rejects this, referring to parts of the contractual obligation not being fulfilled.

Timor-Leste's experience shows a recurrent pattern of promised investments that raise concerns about good faith, corruption, feasibility, transparency and credibility. This shows the need to strengthen the external investment management system. Structural problems include inadequate "due diligence," great promises but limited implementation, lack of contract transparency, and ineffective institutional coordination.

Foreign investment is important, but we need to be certain that Timor-Leste continues to have a stable system, clarity and accountability. Unclear or unsustainable projects can affect the confidence of serious investors and increase the risk of international legal disputes.

La'o Hamutuk recommends that Timor-Leste continue to strengthen public investment management through strict verification, proof of independent financial capacity and contractual transparency. This strategy will help protect public resources, reduce risks and increase confidence in sustainable investments.

La'o Hamutuk will continue to support efforts to promote international transparency, accountability and good practice to ensure that foreign investment is contributing to sustainable development and benefits for the people of Timor-Leste.

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A few days after La'o Hamutuk issued this press release, Pelican Paradise emailed us to "set the Record Straight."

A month later, unsatisfied with our response, their lawyer sent us a "FORMAL LETTER OF DEMAND."

Both documents are annexed.

⁶ https://www.mj.gov.tl/jornal/public/docs/2021/serie_1/SERIE_I_No_50_A.pdf or https://www.laohamutuk.org/econ/corruption/pelican/211215JRGovRes113PelicanParadisePt_Optimized.pdf

⁷ <https://www.laohamutuk.org/Env/18EnvRegistry.htm#Pelican>

⁸ https://www.tribunais.tl/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Relatorio_Auditoria_Receitas_MJ_final.pdf or https://www.laohamutuk.org/econ/corruption/pelican/Relatorio_Auditoria_Receitas_MJ_final_Optimized.pdf



MEDIA STATEMENT

Pelican Paradise Sets the Record Straight on La'o Hamutuk Statement

8 April 2026, Dili, Timor-Leste — Pelican Paradise has reviewed the statement issued by La'o Hamutuk on 2 April 2026. The statement contains factually incorrect claims and material omissions that together present a misleading picture of the project, and was published without any attempt to contact Pelican Paradise for comment or verification. For an organisation that values transparency and accountability, this is a serious omission. We set out the correct facts below.

1. On the project timeline

The initial project agreement was signed on 16 October 2008 between Datuk Edward Ong and then-Prime Minister H.E. Xanana Gusmão. La'o Hamutuk refers to 2009, which relates to Government Resolution No. 17/2009 that formally approved the project after the original agreement. The legal relationship between the investor and the Government of Timor-Leste began in 2008. This is publicly recorded.

2. On the discovery of skeletal remains at Tasi Tolu and the voluntary return of land

Nine sets of human remains were discovered by Pelican Paradise during its own site survey and excavation works. The company immediately worked with the International Forensic Team from the Victoria Forensic Institute in Australia, together with local police, to carry out a proper investigation. This took place from February 2010 to August 2011 and followed official procedures.

What was not reported is what happened subsequently. Datuk Edward Ong decided, even though there was no legal requirement, that the land with such historical importance should not remain under private ownership. As a result, Pelican Paradise voluntarily returned 56.77 hectares of land to the Government of Timor-Leste. This included the lake areas and the Pope John Paul II Commemorative Memorial site. This return is officially documented in correspondence from 2015.

Pelican Paradise also prepared a full public park design and flythrough video at no cost to the state, so the area could be preserved as a public space that honours Timor-Leste's history.

We did not publicise this at the time, as it was done in good faith, and our focus was on progressing the project. We are now setting the record straight. This action, taken voluntarily and without legal obligation, is inconsistent with the picture of bad faith that La'o Hamutuk seeks to portray.

3. On the golf course

The claim that an 18-hole golf course is being developed on the site of the skeletal remains is incorrect. The 56.77 hectares of land, including the lakes and heritage site, were returned to the Government. Pelican Paradise no longer owns or controls this land and has no rights to develop it.

The planned golf course is located within a separate commercial area retained by Pelican Paradise. It is next to, but not on, the returned land. This is clearly shown in the project's master plan and environmental documents submitted to the authorities.



4. On project progress and the State's obligations

The claim that the investor made no progress for fifteen years is not accurate.

The Special Investment Agreement (SIA) was only formally signed on 3 January 2022, fourteen years after the original agreement. The delay in securing formal land rights was outside the investor's control. During this period, Pelican Paradise had to redesign the project multiple times due to Government changes. These included:

1. Delays in removing sewerage ponds from the proposed hotel site, which held up the initial lease until late 2012
2. A new ADB highway alignment in 2013–2014 that cut through the original hotel location, requiring a full redesign
3. Government Resolution 36/2017, which removed land originally planned for a school and hospital after it was found to be privately owned, requiring another full redesign

Once the SIA was signed, Pelican Paradise moved forward quickly. A full consultancy team was appointed, and surveys were completed by February 2022. A groundbreaking ceremony was held on 25 November 2022, and physical works began on 18 April 2023.

Progress then stopped because the Government did not provide water and electricity as required under Clause 3 of the SIA. At a technical meeting on 3 May 2024, the Director of EDTL confirmed in official minutes that there was no budget in 2024 to connect electricity to the site. The project did not stall because the investor failed to act. It stalled because basic infrastructure was not delivered as outlined in the Special Investment Agreement signed between Pelican Paradise and the Timor-Leste Government.

5. On community rights

The claim that Pelican Paradise violated community rights is unsupported by the facts.

At a Government working group meeting on 30 January 2019, Pelican Paradise clearly opposed forced evictions. Official meeting records show the company stated that land sharing should be applied, meaning communities should not be removed but instead accommodated within the development.

Under the SIA, it is the Government's responsibility, not the investor's, to clear the project site. This responsibility is clearly stated in the agreement. The claim wrongly places this responsibility on the investor.

Pelican Paradise takes the rights and well-being of local communities seriously. The factual record bears this out.

6. On the international school

Pelican Grammar School was registered on 20 November 2023 and is currently operating, serving students in Timor-Leste. It was intended as part of the broader development in Phase 2. As of 1 April 2026, the school has been formally separated to ensure it remains independent.

However, it is incorrect to suggest that this school is the only visible investment made by Pelican Paradise.



After the SIA was signed in January 2022, the company appointed consultants, completed surveys, held a groundbreaking ceremony, and began physical construction. This included earthworks, road construction, and building a Show Unit Gallery.

These works were funded privately using generators and water trucks, as the Government had not provided the required utilities.

These are real, documented investments on the ground.

Regarding the USD 180 million deposit, this was proposed to the Government as part of a deal to secure funding for the development, and it was suggested that the deposit would be placed with an internationally recognised financial institution at attractive interest rates and returned to the Government after five years, upon completion of the construction of the proposed infrastructure. Access to the USD 180 million was only possible with the agreement of the Government, and its purpose was to serve as collateral because the Government had already stated it could not fund the required infrastructure. This arrangement was proposed to bridge a specific infrastructure funding gap identified by the Government itself, and was structured to protect the State's financial interests throughout.

7. On transparency

Pelican Paradise has consistently sought clear and documented communication with the Government over the past 17 years to ensure accountability, especially as personnel changed.

In a letter dated 25 November 2019 to TradeInvest, the company requested that all technical issues be put in writing to avoid repeated clarification due to changes in officials. The company has maintained a strong and consistent documentary record.

Seventeen years, we are still here.

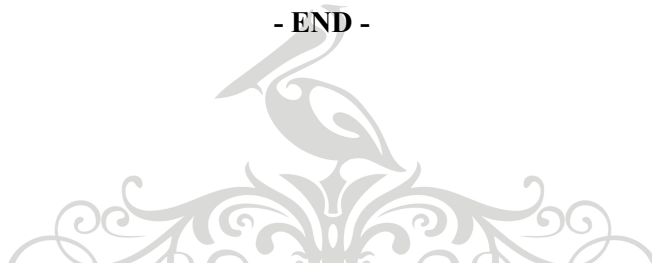
The official Government record shows that the investor reported the discovery of human remains, voluntarily returned land of historical importance, opposed forced evictions, and continues working with the State for over seventeen years despite repeated issues that were not caused by the investor.

This record should be presented accurately. Civil society organisations that speak on public issues have a responsibility to check the facts. We urge La'o Hamutuk to apply the same standards of accuracy and accountability that it expects from others. Public statements on serious matters like this should be based on verified facts.

We invite La'o Hamutuk to engage with us directly. We share the same commitment to transparency, accountability, and the long-term development of Timor-Leste. We welcome this discussion and are ready to share evidence that supports this statement. We also ask for clarity on the sources used by La'o Hamutuk in making its claims. If these claims cannot be supported, we call on La'o Hamutuk to withdraw them.

Pelican Paradise notes its right to respond to false or defamatory statements through appropriate channels and reserves all legal rights accordingly.

- END -





11 May, 2026

TO:

La'o Hamutuk,

The Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis

Rua Felicidade (Rua Cardoso Dias) Gricenfor, Bairro Central, Dili, Timor-Leste

Subject: FORMAL LETTER OF DEMAND

Dear Sirs,

PELICAN PARADISE GROUP LIMITED (hereinafter referred to as "Pelican Paradise"), herein duly represented by Soraia Marques, Attorney-at-Law, respectfully submits this letter in reference to your publication dated 2 April 2026 entitled "*La'o Hamutuk appreciates Government's intention to cancel the Pelican Paradise Paradise project*" (the "Statement").

Pelican Paradise is seriously concerned that the Statement contains several false, misleading, and unsubstantiated allegations that have caused, and continue to cause, significant harm to its reputation, commercial interests, and relationships with stakeholders.

Without limitation, Pelican Paradise identifies the following statements as false, misleading, and/or presented in a materially incomplete manner:

a) Allegations of Bad Faith, Corruption and Lack of Credibility

The Statement asserts that the project raised concerns regarding "*bad faith, corruption, feasibility, transparency and credibility.*" These are serious allegations. However, no evidence is provided to substantiate such claims. Pelican Paradise categorically denies any involvement in corruption or bad faith conduct. The publication of such allegations without evidentiary basis is misleading and defamatory.



b) Mischaracterization of Project History and Conduct

The Statement suggests that the project has demonstrated a pattern of “*problematic signs*” since its inception and implies misconduct by Pelican Paradise and its representatives. This is misleading.

As publicly documented and communicated, Pelican Paradise has complied with all applicable legal and regulatory processes, voluntarily returned 56.77 hectares of land of historical significance to the State without any legal obligation to do so, and maintained long-term engagement with the Government despite repeated delays arising from factors outside its control.

These material facts were omitted, creating a distorted and misleading narrative.

c) Misleading Statements Regarding Project Progress

The Statement implies that the project failed to progress proportionately to its scope and promises. This is inaccurate and misleading.

In particular, the Statement fails to acknowledge delays caused by Government actions and infrastructure constraints, the formal execution of the Special Investment Agreement in January 2022, and the subsequent works undertaken by Pelican Paradise, including surveys, construction activities, and overall project development.

The omission of these facts materially misrepresents the project’s progress.

Pelican Paradise previously raised concerns regarding the inaccuracies in the Statement and expressly requested that La’o Hamutuk retract and properly clarify the relevant statements.

In response, the only action taken was the inclusion of a comment on the English version of the blog post which contained a link to Pelican Paradise’s response statement. This falls materially short of any recognized standard for correction, retraction, or clarification.

In particular, the original statements remain published without amendment or qualification, no correction has been incorporated into the body of the Statement, the comment lacks prominence



and is unlikely to be seen by an ordinary reader, and a hyperlink to Pelican's response does not correct or neutralize the false or misleading impressions created by the Statement.

Accordingly, no meaningful or effective steps have been taken to remedy the inaccuracies.

Pelican Paradise formally demands that La'o Hamutuk immediately retract the false and misleading statements identified above and publish a clear, express, and unambiguous correction. Such retraction and clarification must be published in the same medium(s) as the original Statement, be afforded equivalent prominence and visibility (and not be confined to comments, footnotes, hyperlinks, or other inconspicuous formats), and clearly identify the statements that were inaccurate while providing the corresponding corrected information.

Pelican Paradise hereby requires full compliance with the demands set out in this letter within ten (10) days of receipt. Pelican Paradise reserves all its rights, including the right to pursue any and all legal and equitable remedies available to protect its rights, interests, and reputation.

Yours faithfully,


Soraia Marques

JLA, Advogados e Consultores, Lda.

<u>PROCURAÇÃO</u>	<u>POWER OF ATTORNEY</u>
<p>Pelican Paradise Group Limited, sociedade comercial constituída nas Ilhas Virgens Britânicas, com endereço de correspondência em 60 Paya Lebar Road #07-45, Paya Lebar Square (Lobby 2), Singapore 409051 ("Sociedade"), neste ato devidamente representada por Datuk Dr Ong Han Nam, com poderes para o ato, constitui seus bastantes procuradores os Senhores(as) Lukeno Hamud Ribeiro Alkatiri, Soraia Regina dos Santos Marques e Andreia Morris Mendes, Advogados, todos colaboradores da sociedade de advogados JLA, Advogados e Consultores, Lda., com escritório sito na Av. Presidente Nicolau Lobato, Timor Plaza, CBD 3, 2.º Andar, 202, 20 de Setembro, Bebonuc, Dom Aleixo, Díli, República Democrática de Timor-Leste, aos quais confere os poderes forenses gerais por lei permitidos para efeitos de preparação, apresentação e acompanhamento de uma Carta de Interpelação, a ser dirigida à Organização Não-Governamental La'o Hamutuk, relacionada com um artigo publicado na sua plataforma online referente à Sociedade, incluindo poderes para praticar todos os atos, comunicações e</p>	<p>Pelican Paradise Group Limited, a commercial company incorporated in the British Virgin Islands, with its correspondence address at 60 Paya Lebar Road #07-45, Paya Lebar Square (Lobby 2), Singapore 409051 ("Company"), namely, hereby duly represented by Datuk Dr Ong Han Nam, with the powers for this act, hereby appoints as its legal proxies: Mr. Lukeno Hamud Ribeiro Alkatiri, Ms. Soraia Regina dos Santos Marques and Ms. Andreia Morris Mendes, Lawyers, all from the law firm JLA, Advogados e Consultores, Lda., with registered office at Av. Presidente Nicolau Lobato, Timor Plaza, CBD 3, 2.º Andar, 202, 20 de Setembro, Bebonuc, Dom Aleixo, Díli, República Democrática de Timor-Leste, and to whom it grants the general legal powers of representation permitted by law, for the purpose of preparing, submitting and following up on a Letter of Demand, to be served upon the Non-Governmental Organization, La'o Hamutuk, in connection with an article published on its online platform concerning the Company, including the authority to undertake all acts, communications and correspondence</p>

correspondência necessários ou convenientes para esse efeito. -----	considerados para esse	deemed necessary or convenient in relation thereto. ----- -----
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Díli, 11 de maio de 2026 | 11th May 2026



Datuk Dr Ong Han Nam