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SUBJECT: THE UNITED NATIONS IN TIMOR-LESTE: LOOKING BACK AND FORWARD

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a private, valedictory interview, Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Timor-Leste Atul Khare provided the following, useful assessment of UNMIT's accomplishments over the last few years and the significant challenges that lie ahead. His self-serving comments highlight UNMIT's contributions towards maintaining peace and stability, but gloss over its failure to rebuild a credible, professional police force. With the United Nations now poorly positioned to provide effective support on continued security sector reform, Khare correctly highlights the need for UNMIT to place a higher priority on supporting democratic governance and socio-economic development in the coming years. End Summary.

UNMIT Accomplishments

¶2. (SBU) Looking backwards at his three-year tenure as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Timor Leste, Atul Khare listed three primary accomplishments of the United Nations Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT). First, UNMIT was instrumental in helping to restore stability and security to the country after the violent clashes in 2006. Second, UNMIT has helped the Timorese leadership earn the faith and confidence of its own people and the international community. Finally, UNMIT's efforts have contributed to a fundamental desire on the part of the Timorese body politics to be in conformity with laws, regulations, and democratic norms.

¶3. (SBU) Implicit in SRSG Khare's remarks was the fact that the 2006 crisis represented a major setback for the development of Timor-Leste and that much of the work over the last three years has been to address the aftermath and challenges that it created. As a result of the crisis, SRSG Khare notes, the

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international community saw Timor-Leste as a 'failing,' if not a 'failed' state. The restoration of stability, confidence in the Timorese leadership, and a desire to strengthen democratic norms has successfully reversed that impression.

¶4. (SBU) SRSG Khare points to a few specific examples that illustrate the progress. First, the country's response to the February 2008 attacks on the President and Prime Minister demonstrated the ability of the various political factions to forge a consensus and coordinate an appropriate response on issues of national interest. Second, the parliamentary debate in October of a censure motion in response to the GOTL's handling of the Martenus Bere case demonstrated that the increased importance that Timorese politicians and leaders attach to democratic institutions and processes. SRSG Khare noted that there will always be crises, but the challenge is to strengthen the mechanisms to manage such crises and to use them, when possible, as opportunities to build social cohesion.

National Challenges Ahead

¶5. (SBU) Despite these accomplishments, however, SRSG Khare frankly admitted that Timor-Leste and UNMIT continue to face a number of serious challenges in the years ahead. One set of challenges lies in the area of consolidating democracy. Elections, institutions, and laws are not enough. Timorese lack a public understanding of the significance of independence, democracy, elections, and democratic institutions. In fact, the Timorese state simply does not exist in much of the country. There is a continued lack of faith in the rule of law and the Timorese authorities have not developed a practical means by which to incorporate the long-standing institutions of traditional justice into their formal judicial system. Establishing civilian control, professionalization, and the delineation of roles of the security forces is incomplete. Finally, managing the transfer of responsibility from the current generation of leaders to the next generation will be difficult.

¶6. (SBU) Another set of challenges, of course, is economic and is shared by most lesser-developed countries. Despite Timor-Leste's petroleum fund and modest oil revenues and even

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assuming double-digit annual growth rates, the country will remain impoverished for at least the next ten years and more. Timorese leaders have not yet come to grips with how the country will integrate with the global economy. Low social capacity can only be addressed by significant investments in education, and particularly 'life skills' or practical vocational training. SRSG Khare noted disparagingly that there are 26 universities in Dili (there should be perhaps two) and that despite a wide range of business management courses, no training is offered to develop agricultural skills (despite the fact that 85 percent of the population survives on subsistence agriculture).

¶7. (SBU) A final set of challenges lies in the area of promoting social cohesion and a sense of national identity. SRSG Khare admitted that the inter-regional tensions that flared during the 2006 crisis have been only 'superficially addressed.' He added that the political parties have little incentive to address this problem because they actually 'gain' from such differences and draw political support from specific regions. SRSG Khare noted that although some Timorese leaders have begun to reassess their history in an effort to develop a sense of national identity, there has not yet been a broad public discourse on the subject. SRSG Khare suggested, moreover, that those who led the country to independence may not necessarily be the best ones to lead an independent country.

Reinventing UNMIT

¶8. (SBU) Asked how UNMIT's mission would have to change in the coming years, SRSG Khare said that while the overall objectives would remain the same, the priorities should shift. Specifically, he listed the main objectives in the following order of importance:

- A) Strengthening the culture of democratic governance
- B) Promoting socio-economic development
- C) Establishing rule of law, including traditional justice and regularizing land claims and property rights
- D) Continued security sector reform and development

¶9. (SBU) SRSG Khare noted that the handover of policing responsibilities will continue, although the Timorese police (PNTL) would continue to need considerable bilateral assistance and professional training for years to come. The UNPOL presence would likely decline to only two formed police units (FPU) by the 2012 elections and could leave altogether if those elections go smoothly. As the Mission decreases in size, however, staffing dedicated to the top three priorities listed above should maintain their current levels.

Appeal for Continued U.S. Engagement

¶10. (SBU) SRSG Khare made a personal appeal for continued USG engagement in Timor-Leste, arguing that in addition to the our moral responsibility to this country, Timor-Leste's success or failure will have significant implications for the United States and the international community. Specifically, if Timor-Leste succeeds, it will be an excellent example to the world that democracy, human rights, and rule of law are as important to lesser-developed countries as they are to developed countries. If it fails, however, Timor-Leste's strategic location between a stable ASEAN and a prosperous Australia may make it a transit point and safe haven for narcotics, human smuggling, organized crime, and international terrorists. SRSG Khare noted that the United States is uniquely positioned in Timor-Leste to serve as an important bilateral partner and a genuine honest broker between Timor-Leste and the various bilateral partners and international donors here.

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Comment

¶11. (SBU) SRSG Khare departs Timor-Leste on December 11, 2009. He is credited by Timorese and international partners alike for his tireless effort to improve and institutionalize effective communication and consultation among Timorese leaders and key state institutions. His work, and that of his mission, contributed critically to the reestablishment of peace and security following the 2006 crisis and the successful holding of several national elections in 2007 and 2009. Less successful has been UNMIT's reconstitution of the Timorese police, and many Timorese fault Khare for failing to effectively lead the large UNPOL force viewed locally often as undisciplined and insensitive to Timorese customs and aspirations. Among Timorese

leaders too often inclined towards impunity, Khare's consistent and outspoken support of human rights and the rule of law no doubt generated considerable discomfort. In sum, Khare leaves respected, if a bit unloved. He also leaves behind the major task of drawing down the UN PKO in a way that maintains stability and begins to repair the organization's bruised reputation among the Timorese public.
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