



Return of the exile

story **Wilson da Silva**

José Ramos Horta came home to East Timor to a hero's welcome after his 24-year battle for justice. But there were bitter losses along the route.

It began with a hurried flight on a chartered twin-engine Cessna from Dili to Darwin on December 4, 1975. Almost exactly 24 years later, on December 1, 1999, it ended with another flight, this time on a United Nations Hercules that left Darwin for Dili. José Ramos Horta, Nobel Peace laureate and East Timor's chief campaigner abroad, was finally ending a life in exile. Although the trip is a mere 640km, it was a distance that for half his life was an impossible gulf to traverse. Ramos Horta was 25 when he left East Timor. He had been sent on an urgent mission to the United Nations, to bring the

world's attention to an expected Indonesian invasion of the small half island that, for half a millennium, had been a backwater Portuguese colony.

Fearful of the looming invasion and with Portugal seemingly disinterested, his colleagues in the left-wing Fretilin party had declared unilateral independence six days earlier, creating the Democratic Republic of East Timor. Ramos Horta was in Darwin and was caught unawares, on his way back to Dili after a frenetic but largely unsuccessful lobbying of foreign embassies in Canberra. When he returned the next day, he discovered he had been made foreign

minister and ordered to New York to raise the alarm.

But by the time his plane touched down en route in Lisbon, Indonesian paratroopers had descended on Dili. Hundreds lay dead along the beachside promenade that is Dili's main street. Ramos Horta knew none of this until he was greeted at Lisbon airport by Armando, an uncle he knew of but had never met. "The sons of bitches have invaded," he told the young man through tears of grief and disbelief.

Three days after the invasion had begun, Ramos Horta arrived at JFK airport on a cold winter's day. He was met by a driver from the embassy of Guinea-Bissau, a small, newly independent African country that had also been a Portuguese colony. "He took us to our hotel room and checked the locks, closed the door and tried to force it open, checked the windows, looked outside [and] under the beds to make sure there were no wires or bombs," Ramos Horta recalls.

Portugal had taken an interest too late, but broke off diplomatic relations with Indonesia. It called for an urgent debate in the Security Council, backed by Guinea-Bissau and a clutch of former Portuguese colonies in Africa. As far as the United Nations was concerned, East Timor was still a "non-self-governing territory" under Portuguese administration. Ramos Horta was summoned to address the UN Security Council. He made his way through the unfamiliar snow and negotiated the New York subway to arrive

at the imposing UN building on the East River. "I was probably the youngest and most naive foreign minister ever appointed anywhere."

Despairing for the fate of his small nation of 650,000 people but sensing an opportunity, the nervous Ramos Horta, with a borrowed jacket and an enormous Afro hairdo, read haltingly from a prepared statement as the 15 ambassadors looked on. "This council must call upon the government of Indonesia to withdraw immediately and unconditionally all its forces from the territory," he demanded.

As the debate ensued, Ramos Horta grew more optimistic. "I was shy, intimidated, excited, euphoric and fearful. The transition from East Timor to corridors of power of the UN couldn't have been more dramatic. But it was obvious to all that the invasion of East Timor was a clear breach of the UN Charter. Despite Indonesia's spurious arguments to justify its intervention and its strenuous efforts to block the decision by the Council, a rare unanimous resolution was reached by December 22. This occurred in the middle of the Cold War ... On the face of it, such a unanimous decision was remarkable."

Ramos Horta was ecstatic. At 25, the youngest person to take part in a Security Council meeting, he held in his hands a resolution affirming the right of the Timorese to self-determination and calling on Indonesia to withdraw its troops "without delay". He had left Dili promising to return in a few weeks. Now that seemed like a real possibility.

But nothing happened. "That was the year that my schooling in international hypocrisy began. It was just another Security Council resolution that no-one had the stomach to pursue," Ramos Horta says.

Christmas came and with it word that Indonesia had taken Dili, albeit with heavy casualties. East Timor's Falintil fighters had withdrawn when the Indonesian contingent in Dili reached 10,000; Falintil had only 3000 men under arms. Ramos Horta worried about his mother and siblings, whom he knew to have escaped to the mountains, as had two-thirds of the country's population. Just over a year later, he heard that his youngest and dearest sister, Mariazinha, had been torn apart by a shrapnel bomb – dropped by one of the Bronco aircraft hurriedly sold to Indonesia that same year by the United States. "American democracy at work," he quips sarcastically.

For three years, Indonesian casualties mounted as the Timorese resistance proved stiffer than expected. Indonesia poured military hardware into the campaign and an estimated 200,000 Timorese died either directly or indirectly – almost a third of the population. His brothers Gui and Nino had joined Falintil and, as Ramos Horta would later hear, were killed in combat. "They were the darkest years of our struggle," he says. "That's when the largest massacres took place, when literally tens of thousands of people died like flies – of massacres, of hunger, fleeing bombardments, military onslaughts and encirclement, unable to cultivate the land. These were years when I thought ... we were defeated. The odds were so great that I thought we were being deleted from history."

East Timor was a closed territory and little news got out, although refugees were sporadically fleeing to Darwin, Lisbon and former Portuguese colonies in Africa like Mozambique, which offered the Timorese leadership asylum. It was here that the exiled representatives of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, a nation barely nine days old before it was snuffed out, made their temporary base. It was here that Ramos Horta met and married Ana Pessoa, a 21-year-old Timorese law student who had been in Lisbon at the time of the invasion. A member of Fretilin, she joined the small contingent of 30 or so compatriots in Mozambique to help plan their political struggle.

"We had a ceremony before our colleagues at the Fretilin mission in Mozambique," recalls Pessoa, now a law professor in Mozambique and a Fretilin senior official. "The celebrant read from the book and we said yes, we want to marry. We didn't even have wedding rings!" They had a son, Loro, who was stricken with glaucoma from birth, requiring repeated surgery.

The shattered resistance leadership decided to send Ramos Horta back to New York to win world support for the cause. There was little money – only what working exiles could scrape together to donate, or the occasional handout from a government, church group or organisation. Ramos Horta set himself up in a small, cockroach-infested Manhattan apartment near Second Avenue. He worked nights as a security guard for a private school and glad-handed diplo-

wing. At first the boy idolised, then grew to resent, his absent father. Pessoa says there was little choice: "We needed him at the United Nations and couldn't send anyone just to be with him. In the end, he was condemned to loneliness in order to advance the cause."

It was the rise to power of Xanana Gusmão as head of the Timorese resistance in 1981 that reinvigorated the movement. Like Ramos Horta, he was a journalist, and later a poet and painter, who had joined Fretilin in the early days, though he was more often remembered for his basketball prowess than his prose. But in the jungles of East Timor, following the death in combat of their military leaders, Gusmão was elected Falintil commander and grew into a formidable warrior.

At the time, not only the military leaders but also the entire executive of the Fretilin government had been annihilated in combat or captured and killed. Falintil was broken into three, with Gusmão in the far east of the country, in the mountainous terrain of Los Palos, unaware of the other two remnants. He sent three separate undercover squads into the countryside to make contact with surviving units – only one made it – and slowly units were reunited. Gusmão then travelled the island, meeting clandestinely with ordinary people and asking, "Do you want us to continue fighting? Should we continue the struggle?" Everywhere, he heard the same answer: "Yes."

Falintil was retrained and tactics were changed. Attacks were fewer, better planned and targeted the



rear column of Indonesian convoys. Gusmão and his men resigned from Fretilin and made Falintil a non-political armed force. He created and headed an umbrella political body which he invited all parties to join; it became the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT). Ramos Horta was appointed his special representative abroad, head of the diplomatic wing and Gusmão's deputy. Some guerillas were demobilised and sent into the towns to establish a clandestine front that could collect intelligence and work underground for the resistance. All of this began to pay off. Success occurred not only on the battlefield but also with the

mat at the UN during the day, sending part of the money to Mozambique for his baby son. "I could have walked away," he says. "But never once I lost hope. Never once I thought of quitting altogether." He stayed 13 years before moving to Australia, dodging bill collectors, scraping together enough to get by. "He was very often ill," says Pessoa. "There were days when he would eat just the once. I was in New York for a month once and ... I saw what he ate: yoghurt, orange juice and a chocolate bar or ice cream. He would go days eating just that. A colleague visited him for a while and came back horrified; he said a week would go past where all they would eat would be nuts and figs."

The separations took their toll and the marriage petered out. Loro, raised by Pessoa, grew up hearing of his father's work as leader of East Timor's diplomatic

Above left: Ramos Horta visits the grave of his father, Francisco, at Dili's Santa Cruz cemetery, the site of the Dili massacre. Right: The returning Ramos Horta, accompanied by Interfet bodyguards, shakes hands with well-wishers.

◁ dramatic improvements in intelligence and coordination between armed units and the underground. And finally, thanks partly to better communication technologies, the resistance command inside began to communicate with their compatriots in exile, including Ramos Horta.

From his mountain hideout, Gusmão sent orders abroad and discussed tactics at the UN with Ramos Horta. It was during this time that Ramos Horta, after correspondence with Gusmão, devised a peace plan that would allow Indonesia a face-saving exit from the territory, with autonomy for East Timor over five to 12 years, ending in a UN-supervised referendum on integration with Indonesia or independence. The plan was formally proposed in 1992 and, although dismissed by Indonesia, won diplomatic plaudits and showed the Timorese were open to negotiating a resolution.

Then came the October 1991 murder of Sebastião

East Timorese hold up their voter documents as they rush a polling station in Maliana on August 30, 1999; 98.6 per cent of registered voters took the ballot.



Gomes. Although student activists like Gomes had been tortured and “disappeared” during Indonesia’s occupation, Gomes’ death was to set off a chain of events that eventually saw Indonesian troops leave in ignominy nine years later, ending Ramos Horta’s exile.

What has become known as the Dili massacre of November 12, 1991 began as a funeral procession for Gomes, a clandestine operator killed by Indonesian troops while hiding out in Dili’s Motael Church. Outraged by the violation of the church’s sanctity and the death of a popular young man, hundreds marched from the church to his grave at Santa Cruz cemetery. At the cemetery, members of the clandestine front unfurled banners calling for independence and waved banned flags of the Falintil guerilla army and Fretilin. In Australia, we’d call this a peaceful demonstration. To Indonesian officers, it was open provocation, a display of the kind of resistance that Jakarta denied even existed. And it was led by men and women in their teens and twenties, a generation that had grown up speaking Bahasa Indonesia and saluting the Indonesian flag, and was not even alive when the Portuguese ruled in their benign and disinterested way.

Indonesian troops opened fire on the crowd. East Timor’s Catholic Bishop Carlos Belo, who attended the aftermath, estimates that at least 250 were killed.

Unlike other massacres in East Timor, this one was captured by the cameras. Three journalists – one British, two American – were in the crowd. The television images, smuggled out and broadcast two months later, galvanised the world’s attention on East Timor.

“It catapulted East Timor to the international front page,” says Ramos Horta. It was an opportunity he didn’t miss, plying the airwaves and knocking on diplomatic doors around the world. It triggered an outpouring of guilt in Portugal, where the government was forced to push for a solution. Incoming UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali appointed a special envoy to deal

with East Timor and brokered meetings between Indonesia and Portugal. Activists began to make the job of Indonesian diplomats hell. The US Congress cut aid to Indonesia, as did many European governments. The world’s eighth-largest country, one of the economic powerhouses of Asia, was finding it hard to keep friends.

Then came the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. On October 12 that year, Ramos Horta was playing with his niece at his mother’s modest rented apartment on the outskirts of Sydney when he got the call. “I just could not believe it,” he recalls. “We had been lobbying for Bishop Belo to get it for a few years, and to be frank I had completely forgotten about it.” Both he and Belo were awarded, the bishop for his interventions with the Indonesian military to save the lives of the tortured and detained, and Ramos Horta for his peace plan of four years earlier.

The announcement dismayed the Indonesian elite.

hours. News of Ramos Horta’s return had spread through the shattered town which, like many, had suffered the consequences of rejecting Jakarta’s rule in a last orgy of violence by the departing Indonesian army and its militias.

Ramos Horta was greeted by a bevy of Timorese leaders, many of whom had fought the struggle on the ground and seen many friends and family pay in blood. The four-kilometre ride from the airport to the city’s old colonial heart was impassable, as so many people thronged the streets. The UN Range Rover gave up on the outskirts of the city centre and he walked the last few kilometres to the old Governor’s Palace, from which the Indonesians had ruled and the Portuguese before them. Now above the main entrance hung a simple blue banner with white lettering, reading “UN”. An honour guard of old warriors in traditional garb, beating drums and blowing trumpets, led him to the entrance, where a podium was set up. Thousands of people packed into the Don Henrique beachfront park that abuts the old palace.

There was wild cheering as Ramos Horta shouted, hoarse with emotion, “Viva the people of East Timor!” The crowd erupted with, “Viva!” “Viva Xanana Gusmão!” (“Viva!”) “Viva Falintil!” (“Viva!”) “Viva CNRT!” (“Viva!”)

Speaking the local language of Tetum, he leaned into the microphone, his voice at times shrill. “I did not come today, after 24 years, with my colleagues to teach lessons to anyone, because the true heroes are those who stayed behind. They who have suffered, who were tortured, who were raped, they’re the ones who were killed. With humility, we bow to their courage, the courage of our brothers and sisters in this land.”

When he concluded, a chant started in the crowd that rippled through the thousands standing in the twilight and grew to a thunderous roar: “Viva! Viva! Viva! Viva!”

Twenty-four years of knocking on diplomatic doors,

“The true heroes are those who stayed behind. They who were tortured, who were raped, who were killed.”

Belo they could tolerate, being a man of the cloth who eschewed discussion of Indonesia’s claim over the territory. But Ramos Horta had long been an enemy. An irate Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, called Ramos Horta “a very clever manipulator” who incited his people from a safe perch abroad. Newspaper editorials dubbed him an “opportunist of mixed blood”, “the Pied Piper” of a non-existent resistance. “Are we going to surrender to the sight of foreigners trampling on us and making fools of us with this Nobel?” demanded Indonesian armed forces spokesman Brigadier-General Amir Syarifuddin.

It was only eight months later that economic ruin swept through Asia like a firestorm. None was hit worse than Indonesia. Students and democracy activists took to the streets and by July 1998, the 32 year reign of General Suharto, the authoritarian leader and architect of the invasion of East Timor, had ended. Indonesia was facing economic ruin and Suharto’s replacement, former vice-president B. J. Habibie, caved in to international pressure and offered to resolve the issue of East Timor with a UN-supervised referendum. On August 30, 1999, the Timorese came down from the mountains and the towns and voted 78.5 per cent for independence.

By the time the UN plane touched down in Dili just before sunset on December 1, people had been waiting for

of arguing East Timor’s case at the UN and struggling to have the issue noticed in the media, of sleeping on friends’ sofas and borrowing money for airfares back and forth across the globe – all came to an end right here, on this wild and humid December night in the town where he was born, and to which he had promised to return within a few weeks of his departure.

A few days later, on the anniversary of the invasion that kept Ramos Horta from his homeland, he attended a service at Motael Church. It was here that Sebastião Gomes had been shot, triggering the events that culminated in the painful transition to independence.

“I feel extremely happy,” Ramos Horta said. “But also I am conscious that all is not going to be rosy. We have to start from ground zero. We have to build political institutions, economic infrastructure, draft a constitution, create a legal system, provide healthcare, schools, food aid. But I am very optimistic. We have a great people and a lot of support from the rest of the world.”

He eschews any role in the government that will be formed after independence is granted by the United Nations Transitional Administration, which is now formally in charge. He wants to settle down, teach aspiring Timorese diplomats and take up writing again. “I want to stay here. I have been away for 24 years.”