

**TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE HELD
BY SRSG SERGIO VIEIRA DE MELLO
13 APRIL 2002, DILI**

Good morning and a warm welcome to you all.

This, as you know, is the official day of reflection, prior to the presidential election that will be held tomorrow. But first, let's not forget it's the first in the history of this country. I'd like first of all to congratulate both candidates, Xanana Gusmão and Xavier do Amaral, for the excellent and exemplary conduct of this presidential campaign. They both deserve our admiration for the way in which they conducted their debates, their public meetings, in a spirit of mutual respect...which is what we expected from them. And this, as you know, certainly has not come as a surprise to me, or any other observer of the Timorese realities, for that matter. Far from it. This presidential campaign, and forgive me if this may sound repetitive because you've heard me say this before, has once again demonstrated the political maturity of the East Timorese people and of their leaders.

Tomorrow, therefore, is the last important milestone in the construction of democratic institutions and of a truly democratic East Timor.

I want to also congratulate the Independent Electoral Commission here, because once again, after the excellent job they did in the preparations they did for the Popular Consultation in August 1999 as well as in the preparations for the elections for the Constituent Assembly last year, they have demonstrated, once again, that they are 100 per cent independent, 100 per cent neutral, and 100 percent professional, which is what we expected.

I am certain that the ballot tomorrow will be free and fair. And for that to happen, election preparations have been at full pace for several months. About 5,280 electoral staff have been trained in the proper procedures for a free and fair poll, IEC staff and UN-run TV and radio have canvassed the territory with voter education messages, more than 100 observer groups, both national and international, have registered to participate in polling day, and almost 3,000 political party/candidate agents have registered and will be witnessing all steps of the polling, and the counting, of the ballot.

The Commission has also succeeded in its goal, our goal, of increasing the participation of the East Timorese in the political process of this third UN-run ballot. For the first time, as you know, the East Timorese hold the majority of seats in the commission, three out of five. For the first time East Timorese head all 13 district electoral offices and 150 Timorese Districts Electoral Officers will be in charge of polling centres (this is roughly half of all polling centres in the country). And for the first time East Timorese will participate in the actual counting of the ballots. This capacity building process is critical to East Timor conducting its own elections in the future.

Let me stress the obvious again that this is a UN-run election. That means that it must – and it will – adhere to and reflect international standards. The people of East Timor have already voted twice in UN ballots that were conducted in a highly professional, free and fair manner, and they should expect nothing less from us this time as well.

Now to voters, to the East Timorese voters. Let me send a very strong message as I did in the past. And encourage them, encourage you, to again turnout in large numbers. Your participation provides a meaning to the word democracy, which is a government from the people and for the people. And the more Timorese that participate in tomorrow's election, the greater the legitimacy of this last election and of the entire political transition process.

We who observe this process have developed a strange habit, which is to take these milestones and these achievements for granted. Well, the Timorese do not, because they know what this has cost.

And these elections required a great deal of reflection, of debate, of consultation, huge efforts on the part of the Timorese themselves, starting with the Standing Political Committee of the then-National Council, which incidentally happened to be headed by Xanana Gusmão in those days, and a report that the Political Committee submitted to the National Council on the 22nd of February last year. So this gives you an idea of how long it took for these ideas to emerge and for a calendar to be approved, to be accepted by all Timorese. And tomorrow's election is the last stage in this calendar prior to Independence, and I'm certain that all Timorese who have acquired the right to vote, that is those who are 17 or above, will turn up tomorrow to vote for their president, the first such elections in the history of this country.

So thank you for your attention and I'll now take your questions.

Questions and Answers:

Q: (in English) How concerned are you about the potential for political instability, given that Xanana Gusmão is elected, given the increasingly open dispute between him and Fretilin, given the fact that Mari Alkatiri will be Prime Minister?

A: Sure, well Richard, I'm not surprised that you asked the question, but let me tell you that I'm not worried at all. Both of them have demonstrated in the past that they are responsible and mature political leaders. They have fought for the same cause after all, which is the independence of this country and its freedom. Both have the same objectives, which is peace, stability and prosperity in East Timor; and transforming this country into a beacon of peaceful cooperation and prosperity in the region. And I'm certain that both of them will realise that what the international community – but more particularly what the Timorese people – expect from them is to join hands and work together to achieve that goal. I have absolutely no doubt about that.

Q: (in Portuguese) You are leaving on the 21st of May, right? What will you be doing next?

A: (in Portuguese) Correct, I will depart Dili on the 21st. Regarding my next mission, you will have to address that question to the Secretary-General. I do not know yet.

Q: (in English) Do you have any concerns that the voter turnout will be smaller than the last election because of voter intimidation by Fretilin?

A: First of all, I've heard of no intimidation by Fretilin or by anyone else. Intimidation is no longer in the vocabulary of the Timorese, I can assure you of that, and certainly won't be tolerated by us. Secondly, I cannot predict the turnout but I have every reason to believe since, I repeat, this is the first time that the Timorese are given an opportunity in choosing their president – even though you may think you know the outcome, I'm sure each Timorese will want to make sure that the person they have in mind becomes president – so I'm pretty certain that the turnout will be significant. Whether it reaches 91 or 93 per cent, I cannot predict, but it will be significant, there's no doubt about that.

Q: (in Tetum) After 20 May, will the East Timorese continue to use the travel documents issued by UNTAET, because up until now we haven't had any (passports)?

A: The answer is that we are discussing this right now with the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Internal Administration. We have two options: Either the independent government of East Timor starts issuing new East Timorese passports from day one after independence – and the equipment is on its way for those passports to be printed here; or if that is not possible for budgetary reasons, we will continue to issue the existing travel documents, and the independent government of East Timor will declare those documents valid until such time that those passports can be issued. So you can rest assured there will be an answer to your question very soon. And obviously Timorese who are abroad or who need to travel will not be left without valid travel documents.

Q: (in Tetum) There has been information that tomorrow, after the vote, many people will go to the jungle because they fear the situation will get worse. What are the security measures being taken to deal with this?

A: First of all, we've heard such rumours many times before, you will remember. And the Timorese proved those rumour mongers totally wrong, and I'm sure the same will happen tomorrow. But secondly, you're right in posing the question, because we have taken all necessary precautions. I had lunch yesterday with the Timorese Police Commissioner and the UN police leaders. Over 1,500 East Timorese policemen and women will be deployed, so that's almost the total strength of the East Timorese police. The same applies to the UN Police. They are all mobilised tomorrow. And as in previous electoral processes, we will have the military force – but not the Timorese defence force, our UN Peacekeeping Force – on standby in case of need, but I'm sure we will not need them.

Q: (in Tetum) What is your comment on Mari Alkatiri's comments yesterday? He encouraged people to vote, but he himself, when he casts his vote, it will be blank. What are your comments on this statement, and perhaps does Mari Alkatiri have a hidden agenda or a hidden message to convey his sympathisers?

A: Well, first of all, we agree – Mari Alkatiri and myself – that the Timorese should exercise their right to elect their president tomorrow, and that's the main thing. The second part of his statement is his choice. As I have said in Batugade, the Timorese are free to say, to write and to do whatever they like as long as they do it peacefully – and so is the Chief Minister. So I've read his statement, but I have no comment. It is his choice, and what others may decide to do, having read the statement, is also their choice.

Q: (in English) A technical question. You mentioned that these elections are being held to international standards. But the EU observers mission says that it is worried that there is no voter roll. How are you addressing this?

A: This is a matter that we have resolved long ago, and I have Ray Kennedy from our electoral division to provide you with any clarification you may require. Last year we had an electoral roll, which was found to be pretty cumbersome. It delayed the process a great deal. And we all came to the conclusion – United Nations, Independent Electoral Commission, Constituent Assembly, political leadership, political parties – that there was no need for such a roll, particularly for a presidential election. And it was much easier to go for a simple solution that will speed up matters. And the solution is that anyone presenting a valid document – but we are very restrictive on what is a valid document – will be able to cast his or her vote tomorrow. And there is nothing to be worried about. A valid document – I have just checked – is either the original blue registration card issued by Civil Registry, such as the ones that were used last year, or a confirmation paper for those who have either lost or damaged their original cards. Those are the only two acceptable identity documents for tomorrow's elections.

Q: (in English) This has nothing to do with the election, but there was an incident a few days ago concerning an Australian diplomat and her Portuguese boyfriend who were attacked by a group armed with machetes. What do you know about this?

A: What I know is that an investigation of the incident is ongoing. We're looking into this very seriously. That attack appears to be by a group who has done similar things before in the same area, always Pertamina, Comoro. The Portuguese man was injured quite badly, including machete wounds on his lower leg. And as far as the Australian diplomat is concerned, I'm told she is well, may already have travelled to Darwin, and will have to undergo nose surgery.

Q: (in English) Because there were no parliamentary elections before a presidential election, how will that impact on the candidate that is the winner of this election?

A: I think there is absolutely, in my mind, no relationship whatsoever between legislative elections, or parliamentary elections, and tomorrow's presidential election, unless you

can suggest one. But let me perhaps correct what you said. The same Standing Political Committee of the National Council that I referred to earlier, which Xanana Gusmão presided over, and which submitted its report to the National Council on the 22nd of February last year – I have it in my office if you wish to take a look at it – it recommended to the National Council, which later approved its recommendations, that the Constituent Assembly be transformed into the first legislature of East Timor. Secondly, the electoral regulation that was adopted last year for the elections for the Constituent Assembly, also included an article which envisions the transformation of the Constituent Assembly into the first legislature if it so decided. And that is what the Constituent Assembly has decided. So the holding of legislative elections prior to, or simultaneously with, presidential elections has never been considered either by ourselves or the Constituent Assembly, or indeed by the old National Council, as necessary or desirable.

Q: (in English) How will the Prime Minister be chosen? Will there be a process after independence?

A: I believe what will happen is that on the morning of the 20th (of May) between 9 and 10 o'clock in the morning of that day, the current Chief Minister will be confirmed as Prime Minister of the first independent government of East Timor. And he will then appoint his government, which is likely to be similar, very similar, to the current transitional government.

Q: (in English) Some say that Xanana Gusmão is not the right man to be President. He was a great guerrilla leader, but will not make a good political leader because he is too emotional, hot-headed and a loose cannon. What your comment?

A: Well, I am not going to give you my personal opinion, which does not tally with the words you have just used. But let me say that my opinion is pretty irrelevant. What counts is the opinion of the Timorese, and they will express that opinion tomorrow. And it is up to them to decide who – between Xanana and Xavier – who is the best president for this country.