

Minister's Speech on the Occasion of the Australian Awards Alumni Dinner

Dili, Novo Turismo, Thursday, 28 February 2019

His Excellency, the Australian Ambassador to Timor-Leste, Mr. Peter Robert
Her Excellency the Australian Global Ambassador for Women and Girls, Ms.
Sharman Stone Distinguished Member(s) of the National Parliament
Excellency (ies) Member(s) of the Government Respected DFAT High Officials
Private Sector Representatives Esteemed Newly Returned Alumni and Family
Members My Dearest Colleagues – the Alumni Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be back here and seeing some familiar faces in this room, which brings back the nostalgic memories of student's life that many of us gathered here this evening had gone through. I thank the Ambassador, Sue and her team for organizing this beautifully arranged dinner so that we can catch up and to reminisce about the good old days. I am humbled and honoured to have been invited to deliver a welcoming speech in this evening's reception. Ladies and Gentlemen, The Timor-Leste's Strategic Development Plan aspires to turn Timor-Leste into a more prosperous upper middle-income country, with a healthy, well educated and safe population by 2030. This aspiration is built upon three important foundations – social capital, infrastructure and economic development. On the social capital aspect, it is recognized that the true wealth of a nation lies not only on its natural resources, but also on the strength of its human capital. Education is undeniably the key to enable Timorese people to reach their full potential and to unlock any life opportunities. The government of Timor-Leste is strongly committed to invest in the area to ensure that by 2030 the people of Timor-Leste are educated and knowledgeable through having the access to high

quality education that will allow them to participate actively and fully in the economic, social and political development of our nation. To achieve this, the government has invested millions of dollars in building school-related physical infrastructures, funding scholarships and trainings including setting up the Human Capital Development Fund. But it is not enough and the government cannot do it alone. all of you (specially the Minister of Education) would agree with me that this is not an easy task. It requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders including our development partners. Ladies and gentlemen, Australia as Timor-Leste's largest development partner, since the year 2000 through its Australia Award Scholarship program, has made a remarkable difference on Timor-Leste's human resource landscape. Notably, with approximately \$2.5 million Australian dollars that have been allocated each year by the Australian Government on the scholarship program scheme, 300 Timorese, constituted of 180 men and 120 women, have graduated from various prestigious Australian higher institutions, completing different study levels and specializing in a wide range of fields relevant to Timor-Leste's development. As one of the alumni and on behalf of my colleagues, if I am allowed to, I would like to extend our heartfelt gratefulness and must say that we are the lucky few, chosen among many thousands of Timorese to have had a unique opportunity to study in Australia gaining skills and knowledge. Thus, this makes it possible for us to be able to meaningfully contribute to Timor-Leste's development process. Albeit we may be small in number relative to the total population size, but our presence and impacts are slowly but surely being felt and noticed. Some of us are holding leadership positions in the Government's Ministries and the National Parliament. Some are assuming key strategic positions as CEOs, directors, managers, advisers and technical officers in public and private, local and international organizations. And a few are taking the risk of being entrepreneurs. I was also one of the latter before assuming this ministerial position. All in all, we should acknowledge that the Australia Award Scholarship graduates indeed have significant impacts on Timor-Leste's national development progress. Ladies and Gentlemen, This Australian Award Scholarship has also evidently contributed to strengthen the well established and long standing relationship

between Australia and Timor-Leste. With many Timorese experiencing the joy of studying and living in Australia, it helps us also to build and foster enduring people-to-people link with Australia. With this and the recent visits by senior Australian government officials including Ms Julia Bishop, the former Foreign Minister; Ms. Anne Ruston, the Assistant Minister for Development and Pacific; Ms. Sharman Stone, the Australian Global Ambassador for Women and Girls and the on-going Awakening Program between veterans of the two countries, prove that our good relationship is getting stronger and tighter. With that note, as one of the alumni and also a close friend to Australia, if I am allowed to, I would like to recommend to the Australian government perhaps two important things.

- Firstly, to increase the number of scholarships for prospective applicants and;
- Secondly, to reintroduce the undergraduate slots. I understand the significant cost outlays involved with the latter, however, I strongly believe that undergraduate studies provide strong foundation of interrelated courses with greater depth that can equip students to readily enter into the labour market and allow them to pursue further studies at the later stage. I know it is a big ask but I also know that there is no harm in asking. Ladies and Gentlemen, Apart from the significant assistance the Australian government has made on the education sector, it has also been a continuous close partner to Timor-Leste in its continuous effort to providing the country sustainable basic infrastructure for all Timorese people targeting specifically women, children, elder lies, vulnerable people and people with disabilities. In the Ministry that I am in charge of, Ministry of Public Works, which deals mostly with basic infrastructures, besides water and sanitation and in particularly rural roads, the Australian government from 2012 to 2021 has been providing a significant grant fund around \$62 Millions Australian Dollars to finance the technical assistants through the R4D program to undertake design and supervision assisting our government to have developed approximately total of 600 km rural road projects in the country.

These projects are of high quality and through competitive biddings have provided jobs for many Timorese people as they involve local communities specially women in the implementation process. The R4D program has continuously been providing a sustainably steady growth in the socioeconomic development for all Timorese specifically community in rural areas. Thus, the Ministry of Public Works is looking forward to expanding and continuously working closely with our Australian counterpart on this very important sector in the country.

Ladies and Gentlemen

To the newly returned alumni, which this reception is actually for, I congratulate you and your proud families on your academic achievements. Completing a formal education is not easy but applying it, is a much bigger challenge. So the struggle is not over yet. In fact, it has just started. In this occasion, I'm also pleased to invite you all the graduates with background infrastructure studies to apply for any new job opportunities that may arise from our infrastructure programs including the institutional reform and human resource restructuring in the Ministry of Public Works, when the Electricity of Timor-Leste, EDTL, and Directorate General for Water and Sanitation become state own companies and regulatory bodies. With that appeal, I would like to conclude this brief with a quote from one of the all time superhero movies – the Spider-man – “with great power comes great responsibility”. So I call upon you all, my dear colleagues – the alumni – with great power that the education had bestowed upon us, the greater responsibilities we will have, to benefit not only ourselves and families but also our beloved country and the world as a whole. *Thank you for your attention and enjoy the rest of the evening.*

Arc. Salvador Eugénio Soares dos Res Pires

Minister of Public Works

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