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Celebrating the Birth of a Nation

By Kofi A. Annan

At the stroke of midnight -- on May 19th, 2002, the world will welcome East Timor into the family of nations. It will be a historic moment for East Timor, and for the United Nations. A proud and resilient people will realize a dream common to all peoples -- to live as free men and women under a government of their own choosing. The pride of the East Timorese on that night will also be the pride of the international community and of the United Nations. Rarely has the world come together with such unity, resolve and speed to secure a people's self-determination.

Credit for this achievement should go first and foremost to the East Timorese people, who have shown great courage and perseverance in rebuilding their country. They have risen to every challenge that has confronted them, and have unfailingly demonstrated their commitment to democracy. There are still daunting challenges ahead, but with a determined and dedicated leadership in place, and a strong Constitutional foundation, I believe they can face the future with confidence.

The international community can also take pride in the contribution we have made. After the swift restoration of order by the international force, authorised by the United Nations Council, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) was established in October 1999 with a mandate as unique as it was ambitious. The United Nations, in partnership with the people of East Timor, was tasked with rebuilding a devastated country and preparing it for independence.

Since then, peace has been secured, and basic governmental structures and laws have been put in place. A sense of normality has returned. Children are attending schools, roads are being built, buildings reconstructed, health systems established - and new businesses are opening up every day. The citizens of East Timor have turned out in overwhelming numbers to vote in the Constituent Assembly and Presidential elections. Most encouragingly, in the last few months increasing numbers of refugees have returned.

United Nations peacekeepers and international police have brought about a return of law and order. The embryonic national military and police forces are creating the foundation for a secure future under the rule of law. True security also requires that East Timor balance effectively the twin demands of justice and reconciliation. This is an area where the international community must continue to support East Timorese efforts, particularly by helping the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, which is about to start its vitally important work.

Perhaps most importantly, the United Nations has helped put in place the foundations for effective, representative, and legitimate government. The people of East Timor are rightly proud of the peaceful and legitimate character of their elections -- just as they are of the high proportion of women in their institutions of state. For many months now, authority in virtually every sphere of public life has been vested in the East Timorese rather than in United Nations officials. On 20 May, when East Timor becomes an independent nation, an experienced and responsible executive and legislature will already be firmly in place.

But all this is only a beginning. The Government of East Timor faces enormous tasks, in the months and years ahead. The world must not abandon East Timor at this critical juncture. It must do everything it can to help ensure that the first years of independence are years of stability and progress. The people of East Timor surely deserve that.

A follow-on UN peacekeeping presence will provide support in three areas that are critical for the stability and viability of the new State: public administration, law and order, and external security. That support will be reduced gradually over two years, as the role of the United Nations becomes one of providing traditional development assistance.

Good relations with its nearest neighbours will be essential to East Timor's future stability. This will include close cooperation with Indonesia, in order to ensure timely agreement on the delimitation of the border, on the situation of the remaining refugees in West Timor, and on cooperation in prosecuting those accused of the serious crimes committed in 1999.

As Secretary-General, I am proud of the part the United Nations has played in that struggle, and especially in its last phase. I pledge that this will mark not an end, but a new beginning. The United Nations stands ready to play its full part alongside the independent nation of East Timor.

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