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`Asian visit paves way for independence'

Lokman Mansor

EAST Timor leader Xanana Gusmao says his visit to several Asian countries ending with Malaysia yesterday has successfully helped lay the foundation for the country's pending independence.

"It was very useful to us in this period of transition because we can now establish our policies, and have foreseen what we can do in the future for our people and our country," he said.

Gusmao, president of the National Council for Timorese Resistance, was accompanied by vice-president and Nobel peace prize winner Jose Ramos-Horta on an 18-day Asian tour which included Malaysia, China, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines.

Speaking at a press conference in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, Gusmao said having established relations with these countries, East Timor will start acquiring knowledge from them that is useful for its development.

"We will be building our country from nothing. It will be exciting and at the same time a great challenge to us and our people. Their expectations are high. They hope for independence and peace to change their lives and improve their living standards. This is why we came," he said.

Ramos-Horta added that during the tour, the delegation received strong support and concrete offers from the governments for assistance in agriculture and fishery, banking and finance, port and airport management, and civil administration.

"We also discussed with Asean leaders various regional issues, including the possibility of East Timor attending future Asean meetings as an observer to start understanding its features and procedures," he added.

Ramos-Horta said within the next two weeks East Timor will send its first technical mission to the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore to discuss areas where these countries can train East Timor officials.

"The next two years are going to be a major challenge, when we build our pool of skilled people who will run the administration, banks, ports and airports," he said.

Asked about East Timor joining Asean, Ramos-Horta said there is no hurry to make a decision as the territory has not yet gained independence.

The East Timorese voted for independence in a UN-sponsored referendum in August last year after 24 years of Indonesian occupation. The UN Transitional Administration will administer East Timor for two to three years before the country becomes fully independent.

Ramos-Horta said East Timor supports a Philippine proposal that command of the UN Transitional Administration be rotated among South-East Asian countries.

Asked if this could mean an expanded military role for Malaysia in East Timor, he said: "Yes, certainly. Normally when a country takes leadership it implies greater contribution. Not only in peacekeeping but also civil administration. Malaysia has one of the best, if not the best, civil administrations in the region."

Asked for his opinion of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, whom he met on Tuesday, Ramos-Horta said Dr Mahathir should be commended for his vision to build and elevate Malaysia to its current status.

"What has been established in Malaysia - peace, stability, harmony - is exceptional. It is a credit to the people of Malaysia and its leadership,"

he said.

Ramos-Horta said he finds parallels between Dr Mahathir and two other leaders, namely Cuban president Fidel Ramos and South Africa's Nelson Mandela.

"These three men can speak their mind, it displeases many people especially in the developed world, and they cannot do anything about it anyway. They speak out very strongly in support of the developing countries. They have the courage to do it and are admired for that," he added.

During their three-day visit to Malaysia, Gusmao and Ramos-Horta also met with Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, and visited the Federal Land Development Authority (Felda), the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority, and the Economic Planning Unit.

Gusmao had requested Felda to explore prospects of opening up land schemes for oil palm plantations in East Timor. According to Felda deputy director-general (service) Datin Nursiah Sulaiman, Gusmao hoped the agency's approach could alleviate poverty among many East Timorese.

Meanwhile, asked for their views on General Wiranto's refusal to resign over alleged war-crimes in East Timor despite being directed to do so by Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, Gusmao said East Timor supports the call for his resignation.

Asked about Wahid's promise to pardon Wiranto if the latter is found guilty, Ramos-Horta said that is the President's prerogative but questioned why he pre-empted the case which has not yet gone to a court or tribunal.

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