

**Kirsty Sword Gusmao – WOMEN FOR PEACE
CONFERENCE – Opening Address – 5 March, 2009**

Dear Prime Minister, members of government,
participants, speakers, sisters,

Bom dia, selamat pagi!

A special welcome to Suraiya Kammaruzaman and the other participants at this conference from Indonesia, to Carol from the Blue Mountains in NSW, and to the other speakers and participants from abroad. Your presence here today means the world to us and is testimony to the strength and value of the bonds of solidarity which exist between women within our region. I congratulate Mana Filomena Reis and the other members of the Aloia conference organising team for your hard work and commitment, and thank the sponsors of this event, principally the Norwegian Embassy Section and AusAID for their generous support.

This conference is a celebration of the myriad creative ways in which women contribute to Peace and nation-building across this small country and indeed around the

world. Let me tell you a little about how this conference came to be.

In April 2007 I addressed the first Women for Peace conference in Jakarta on the issue of Women's Global Challenges. I will never in my life forget how poignant it was on that occasion to share the stage and the conference floor with women from all walks of life, but particularly the elderly, frail and yet still dynamic former members of the Indonesian Community Party or PKI who for the first time in their lives in the course of that conference received public recognition and acclaim for their sacrifices and contributions as women and prisoners of conscience. They danced, they cried, they read poetry and they basked in the long overdue glory of acknowledgement! I am certain that you would agree with me, Bishop Gunnar and Eva, that the sight of those old women clad in their sarongs and linking arms in a joyful dance of sisterly solidarity was truly moving and memorable. I thank you both and your government for allowing that moment to happen. And for allowing this one to grow from that experience.

Acknowledgement is something that all women crave. By way of acknowledging the role of my East Timorese

sisters in the life of this nation, let me share with you some of their extraordinary feats of courage and perseverance I have witnessed in recent times. Within days of violence and conflict erupting on the streets of Dili at the height of the 2006 political crisis, women and children left the relative safety of their homes to gather at the front of our Government Palace. There they unfurled banners, sang and prayed and drew the attention of their leaders to the unimaginable hardship and suffering they faced as the victims of a conflict they neither understood nor had contributed to. Hundreds of thousands of families fled to places around Dili and the country they deemed to be safe and there erected make-shifts camps. In spite of the squalid conditions of these IDP camps and the lack of access to running water, basic sanitation, privacy, food and medical supplies, women succeeded in maintaining a semblance of normal routine and family life for the benefit of their children, reassuring them in times of curfew, keeping them in school and even managing to send them off each morning in crisp, laundered white uniforms. Women members of the Catholic clergy willingly transformed their tranquil convents and boarding houses into homes for thousands of desperately scared and destitute families, encouraging groups of children to sing

to drown out the sounds of rocks being hurled in anger and confusion.

And yet, in spite of all of that, of the assaults on their dignity and trust in their leaders, women yet again took great pride in their fulsome participation in the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections, often walking many kilometres under the hot sun with children in their arms and by their sides to exercise the democratic right their fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers fought and died for.

In the wake of the 2006 crisis, one woman chose to express her hopes for Peace in the form of a poem. I would like to share it with you this morning.

POEM AND SHORT FILM (3 mins)

In a recent email to me, the Australian children's author, Mem Fox, said "If only Peace were more interesting". A sad reality is that when men make war, it makes the news, it captures attention, it commands and diverts resources. When women make Peace, and they do in countless ways every day, who is listening, who is applauding, who is

investing in support of their quiet achievements and contributions?

I am confident that this conference and the ideas we bring to this place from experiences lived and lessons learned in Bougainville, Vietnam, Indonesia, Fiji, Australia and Timor-Leste will contribute to a shift in this paradigm.

And I truly hope that this conference and our deliberations here bring understanding, foster solidarity and ... as with Jakarta, provoke the odd tear and will to dance.

Vivam as mulheres! Hiduplah perempuan untuk perdamaian!

Kirsty Sword Gusmao

5 March, 2009