

**31st Annual Human Rights and People's Diplomacy Training Program
for Human Rights Defenders from the Asia-Pacific Region
and Indigenous Australia**

Timor-Leste

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It is a great honour to be invited to address the Annual Human Rights and People's Diplomacy Training Program. I welcome you all and I extend my great appreciation to our host Timor-Leste, which remains an ardent supporter of a free and democratic Myanmar.

I have been involved with the DTP for many years, including by organising and facilitating trainings for Myanmar activists in Thailand. Equality Myanmar, of which I was the Executive Director, is a DTP Partner. Throughout this time, I have been a great admirer of President Ramos-Horta.

The people and leaders of Timor-Leste know the meaning of sacrifice and struggle. They lived through the darkness of oppression and colonialism, and they gave everything in their fight for freedom and self-determination. Now a free and vibrant democracy, Timor-Leste is a fitting host for a human rights defenders training.

I address you today as the Minister of Human Rights of Myanmar's National Unity Government. Some of the participants here today are from Myanmar. I thank each of you for your tremendous courage and for your dedication to our

nation. We are tormented by the suffering and unimagined atrocities that the military is inflicting on our people. Yet we stand firm and united in our commitment to a new Myanmar shaped by equality, opportunity, justice and democracy.

For two and a half years now, the Myanmar people have pushed back against one of the most powerful militaries in Asia. We have refused to surrender our rights, our freedoms and our democratic aspirations to thugs with guns.

And this revolution, like earlier ones in our history, has been led and inspired by our youth and by human rights defenders.

My own story goes back to the pro-democracy revolution of 1988 when I was a student. Back then, like now, the Myanmar military gunned down student protestors in the streets and disappeared uncounted others in its torture centres.

We were forced to leave our studies and to fight for our survival. We were driven into the jungles of Thailand, where we remained for years.

For more than 20 years I was exiled from my country. I now find myself exiled again. This remains the cost of freedom.

During the 1988 protests, we shouted for democracy and human rights, but at that time I was grappling with what these concepts really meant.

Out of a hunger for knowledge, we set up a “Jungle University” in our Thai camp and filled a library with donated books. I found a copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It spoke of equality and opportunity. Amongst all the suffering I saw around me, human rights made sense.

I began to collect people’s stories and to share them with the world, shining a light on the military’s crimes. As this effort grew, I started the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma. Our mission was to share knowledge, to teach human rights in meaningful ways, and to prepare future generations. Over the years we trained thousands of participants, and our organisation became Equality Myanmar.

This brings me forward to today, where I am part of a new revolution.

The National Unity Government, along with other democratic institutions, is forging a new national contract under a Federal Democracy Charter that is founded on peace, unity, equality and human rights.

Ashamed at the historic policies, practices and rhetoric that laid the ground for atrocities against the Rohingya and other minorities, the National Unity Government is committed to social change, accountability, and to the complete overhaul of discriminatory laws. Our Government has introduced the most progressive policies that our nation has ever seen.

True partnership with ethnic communities and civil society, and acceptance of our responsibilities as a good international actor, lie at the core of all of our actions.

To return to this DTP training, it is important to acknowledge that all of us here have been given the gift of education and opportunity. This training program is a new learning opportunity, and with that comes a responsibility: the responsibility to do all we can with our new knowledge and our new networks to serve people denied these same opportunities. We must never stop growing and improving, we must never stop fighting for justice and defending human rights.

The timing of this course is made even more important by our commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For the better part of a century, the Declaration has recognised the inherent dignity, equality, worth and rights of all people. And it has served as the bedrock for all the conventions and treaties that have followed.

The Declaration in its wisdom also recognises our communities as the true place where our free and full development is possible. Our community here – the human rights community – is a place that we all have a duty to. Through our solidarity, we can work together to protect and promote human rights.

Our region needs a strong generation of human rights defenders. This is your time, and this course will add to your strengths and skills.

I wish you every success and I thank you all for your leadership, for your courage and for your service to the people of our region.
