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Wednesday, March 4, 2009

## Nobel laureate refused offer of help from IRA



José Ramos Horta: "Justice is not retribution. Justice is establishing the truth." Photograph: Anoeck de Groot/AFP/Getty Images

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East Timor's president, José Ramos Horta, told Gerry Adams it was wrong for the IRA to hurt civilians, writes **Kevin Cullen** in Boston

JOSÉ RAMOS Horta, the Nobel laureate and president of East Timor, says he rejected an offer of weapons and logistical support from the IRA and the Basque separatist group Eta in the 1980s, fearing it would hurt the Timorese resistance movement, which ultimately won independence from Indonesia.

Ramos Horta, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 and was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt last year, made the startling disclosure last week during an interview in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he spoke admiringly of the peace process in Northern Ireland.

He said he was living in exile in New York when he met a colleague who was deeply involved "on the military side" of the Timorese resistance movement. He declined to identify his colleague, but said he told him he had met members of the IRA and Eta while travelling in Europe and Africa.

"The Basques and the IRA had offered us weapons and planning to strike at Indonesian interests abroad," Ramos Horta said. "I was angry at my colleague. I abhor any deliberate attempt to harm civilians. I told him it would destroy everything I was talking about, the dignity of the person, and it engages us in terrorism. Secondly, it would be political suicide."

Ramos Horta said he offered a variation of that same theme when he met Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams secretly in Belfast a decade ago. He said he encouraged Adams to seek a political settlement in the North, but found him less receptive when he told him the IRA was wrong to "abduct or hurt civilians".

"I could see it in his face," he said of his meeting with Adams. "He was taken aback by what I said."

Ramos Horta, however, praised the more recent efforts of Adams and other politicians in the North, and the approach taken by the British and Irish governments.

He said the focus on reforming institutions and the reluctance to assign blame was a prudent approach.

While he supported calls for a truth and reconciliation commission in the North, he stressed that he did not support calls for criminal prosecutions, such as the prosecution and imprisonment of the British soldiers who fired on Bloody Sunday or of paramilitaries not yet charged with unsolved murders.

His insistence that the truth and reconciliation process in his country not include prosecutions has been unpopular with many Timorese and human rights groups. He dismissed as meddling and counterproductive a United Nations resolution calling for an international tribunal for war crimes in East Timor.

"I feel it would create a backlash," he said. "I think it would destabilise the country and our relations with Indonesia. We have a good friend in the Indonesian president. And it would be exploited by Islamic radicals and other outside forces. The pursuit of justice cannot be so blind as to ignore the fragility of states, resulting in the unravelling of a fragile peace."

He said the prosecution of human rights abusers in post-conflict societies too often amounted to selective prosecutions, what he called "victor's justice", which fed resentments and grievances that did more harm than good to the prospects of lasting peace and reconciliation. He pointed to the way South African blacks resisted the urge to prosecute and imprison those who used terror to maintain apartheid as an example of a more effective approach.

"The greatest gift for them was freedom," he said. "They did not need revenge."

Horta said that an independent inquiry had found that "80 per cent of the human rights violations that occurred during our conflict were committed by Indonesia, but our side did things too. Getting into a cycle of revenge and retribution is pointless. Justice is not retribution. Justice is establishing the truth."

Ramos Horta praised the Bradley-Eames approach of compensating all victims of the Troubles, despite the controversial measure including the families of paramilitaries.

"You can't have a hierarchy of victims," said Ramos Horta, four of whose 11 siblings were killed by the Indonesian military.

More important, he said, for societies like his and Northern Ireland, was creating an educational system that could use conflict as an object lesson on how not to resolve disputes over territory and national aspirations.

"When you show the truth, the whole truth, in a history put into the school curriculum, rather than use history to perpetuate resentment, you can use it as a teaching tool on the need to avoid violence," he said. "It has to be presented in a way for people to learn about the ugliness of violence."

Ramos Horta was in Boston to speak to the Institute for Global Leadership and the Project on Justice in Times of Transition at Tufts University, which has sponsored peace and reconciliation work in Northern Ireland since 1995. In more recent years, the group has used leaders from Northern Ireland as facilitator in conflict resolution projects in other countries, including Colombia.

Ramos Horta said George Mitchell's experience in Northern Ireland would stand him in good stead in his new, more challenging assignment of negotiating an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"In Northern Ireland, George showed what patience and resolve can accomplish," he said. "He will need all that and more in the Middle East."

"Senator Mitchell is incredibly experienced. He has the power of the US president behind him, and millions of people around the world have faith in this president. You would have to go back to JFK to get close to that sort of international goodwill. Obama has that opportunity," Ramos Horta said, "but I think he has about 12 months to really get something done."

The Americans, he said, would be able to achieve a breakthrough only if they were able to persuade both sides the status quo was not only a failed approach but deeply counterproductive to finding a resolution.

They would have to "lean very hard on the Israelis" to demonstrate that the carte blanche they had given them in the past was over. Occupation, he said, was a failed strategy.

The Palestinians, especially Hamas, would have to accept for their part that their practice of firing missiles into Israel was neither acceptable nor effective.

"I have told radical Palestinians that they do more harm to their cause by engaging in mindless violence. What do they achieve by lobbing rockets into Israel, tactically or pragmatically? At the same time, I would, after so many years of the US basically being lenient toward Israel, I would lean very hard on Israel. The whole dynamic has to change."

On a more personal note, Ramos Horta said he was "almost 100 per cent fit" after surviving near fatal wounds when he was shot by rebel soldiers last year.

"There's still some lingering pain, more discomfort than real pain. But I'm off the pills. I stopped taking them a month ago. I did it myself, without a doctor telling me," he said.

"Emotionally, psychologically, I never missed a night's sleep, never a bad dream. Maybe that will come later. A psychologist told me not to go back to the same house but I don't agree. I think the psychologist they gave me needs a psychologist."

#### **From resistance to power**

José Ramos Horta is the second president of Timor-Leste, or East Timor.

The son of a Timorese mother and Portuguese father, four of his 11 siblings were killed by the Indonesian military.

He founded the Revolutionary Front of an Independent Timor-Leste (Fretilin) but remained a moderate in a revolutionary movement and served as spokesman in exile of the East Timorese resistance during the Indonesian occupation of the territory between 1975 and 1999.

He shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 with his countryman Bishop Ximenes Belo. After independence in 2002, he served as East Timor's first foreign minister, its second prime minister and, since May 2007, its second president.

In February 2008, he survived an assassination attempt by rebel soldiers, two of whom, including rebel leader Alfredo Reinado, were killed.

"You can use history in the school curriculum not to perpetuate resentment but as a tool on the need to avoid violence. It has to be presented in a way for people to learn about the ugliness of violence.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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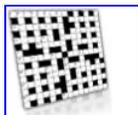
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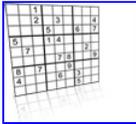
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