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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF TIMOR-LESTE Dili, 16 August 2012

Rector Dr. Aurelio Guterres,
Distinguished Faculty Members, and Dear Students
Your Excellency Minister Freitas of Education
Madam Gusmao Chairperson of UNESCO (National) Commission
Madam Bokova Director-General of UNESCO
Gordon Brown, Special Envoy of the United Nations for Global Education
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bondia. Hau haksolok mai iha Dili. (Good morning, I am happy to be in Dili.)

I am very pleased to be here. It is a great honour for me personally, and as Secretary-General of the United Nations, to meet the very promising future leaders of Timor-Leste. I am also very much pleased to travel with the Director-General of UNESCO, Madam Irina Bokova, who is the highest responsible person in the United Nations system on education. I am also very pleased that one of the global leaders, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the Honourable Gordon Brown, has agreed to serve as a Special Envoy of the United Nations for Global Education. These are very important political forces and supporters for Global Education First.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear students,

I have had a very rich and inspiring visit to Timor-Leste. This has been (a) very brief visit. As you know, I was here five years ago, almost five years ago, December 2007; during my first year, first term. Now this is my first year of my second term as Secretary-General. But much earlier (in that year) than the first time.

From Dili to Liquica... from the police academy to parliament... from the presidential palace to the resistance museum...

In all these places, I have seen the great dynamism the Timorese people are bringing to the job of nation-building.

State-building, nation-building, is very difficult, it takes time. Just to generalise, in 10 years since the restoration of independence, 2002, you have made remarkable progress.

When I was here five years ago, there was a visible uncertainty; political instability, social instability. But now, the(re is) political stability, and economic development – remarkable economic development – signs of hope in the air, and a very vibrant society.

I have seen your great success.

Now, almost five years (later), you have put that uncertainty behind you. In its place, I see a sense of purpose and remarkable achievements. You have come a long way.

Timor-Leste celebrated this year the 10th anniversary of the Restoration of Independence.

I congratulate sincerely all Timorese on this very important milestone.

You also mark the 10^{th} anniversary since joining the United Nations—a period in Timor-Leste has made its mark across the pillars of our work, peacekeeping, development and human rights.

You may be a small nation; but Timor-Leste has a growing profile in the international arena.

This University has a central role in those achievements.

The National University of Timor-Leste bears witness to the history of this country.

Some of its chapters are tragic. Many university buildings were razed during the horrendous violence of 1999. Departments were looted. Students had to flee to the countryside. Yet this University continued to carry the flame of hope, as it always has.

The hope for a country at peace. The hope for a better world.

Today, Timor-Leste is looking to the future, towards this better world.

You have held successful presidential and parliamentary elections this year. The United Nations Integrated Mission will wind down in December.

A new era is opening – an era for national development, national ownership and for strengthening the resilience of your society.

The horizon is filled with great promise. Much has been achieved in ten years. But hard work remains ahead. This is true for all countries today -- in a world changing quickly, a world under pressure.

And we know where this work can and must start: in classrooms and in the hallways of universities such as this. The works starts (with) you; the work starts now. I know this from my personal experience.

As a small, young boy in Korea during and after the Korean War, all I had for a class-room was the tree we gathered around - just to avoid the direct sun. We had no chalkboards or textbooks. I know education deprivation first-hand. I know what education meant.

I also know the power of education to transform.

What my country Korea, may have lacked in education supplies, we more than made up for with our strong yearning to learn. I sense some of the same here in Timor-Leste.

I am coming [just now] from Cassait basic education centre, I met many young pupils, without much educational materials; but they looked very happy. They were studying, and working, and expressing their future: I want to be a doctor, I want to be a journalist, I want to be a scientist. These are good dreams for young students. I couldn't have those kinds of dreams as a young boy.

You know, and I know, that education has the power to strengthen the capacities of every woman and man, to allow them to dream the world anew and shape it in this direction.

It has the power to build healthy, inclusive societies, and to fight the scourges of disease and discrimination.

It is at the heart of nation-building – a force for dignity, sustainability and equity, especially gender equality.

This is why I have made education a top priority of my second term as Secretary-General. Education is a foundation for the future we want.

A world without poverty, violence, hunger, discrimination or disease. A world (where) we can say with confidence that our children will lead better lives than we did.

This cannot be taken for granted. Crafting this future requires new efforts.

Please don't take what you enjoy now for granted. It is not to be taken for granted. You have to work, you have to build, for what you are enjoying now.

That is why, next month, when world leaders gather at the United Nations for the annual general, I will launch Education First -- a new global initiative to promote quality, relevant and inclusive education.

I am pleased that this is my first public opportunity to speak about this effort. We decided to start from Timor-Leste.

The rationale is clear: the world is not on track to meet the goals we set to provide quality education for all. Even more worryingly, progress is slowing down and the great advances we made since 2000 are at risk of being reversed.

In 2010, there were still 61 million children out of primary school, and 10 million more out of secondary school. Many are caught in countries affected by conflict.

Less than 40 percent of countries provide girls and boys with equal access to education.

There are 775 million illiterate adults -- two thirds of whom are women.

And too many young men and women finish their formal schooling with skills that are not relevant either for work or their own personal fulfilment.

We need today a bold new push for education.

We must build on the progress that has been achieving in school enrolment as part of our work to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

We must widen access to all boys and girls, improve the quality of learning, and strengthen values-based education.

These are (the) three priority areas of Education First.

Let me state (them), one by one:

Number one, to put every child in school.

We must ensure that every child -- whatever their gender, background, ethnicity, mother tongue or place they live – has equal access to learning.

This must start as early as possible, and be taken through primary and secondary education. No society can afford to leave any boy and girl behind, or let them drop out.

Investing in educational equity brings tremendous benefits. For each extra year of schooling you give a girl, you increase her future wages by up to 20 percent -- wages which she is more than likely to return to her family and community.

This is the virtuous circle we seek.

Second, we must improve the quality of education.

Access is not enough. The quality of education remains desperately low in many parts of the world. With too many students still lacking basic reading, writing and numeracy skills. There is also a widening gap between the competencies needed in the labour market and those acquired through education systems. Education for all means little, if it is not relevant.

There is a widening gap between the competencies needed in the labour market and those acquired through education systems.

We must bridge this gap through more and better teachers, enhanced training and by harnessing the power of information and communication technologies.

Let us not forget that education is about values.

Number three, this is the third goal of Education First: to foster global citizenship.

Education must foster respect for human rights.

In societies that are increasingly diverse, education can help us better live together by promoting mutual understanding, tolerance and respect for others.

It is also a pathway towards living in harmony with our environment. The answers to climate change cannot only be economic or scientific; they lie as well in the realms of attitudes and behaviours, and making informed choices based on education.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Equity, quality and citizenship matter for every country today.

Here in Timor-Leste, I am pleased to note that school fees have been abolished over the past ten years.

New educational institutions have been built.

Primary school enrolment has increased 24 per cent over the past eight years, a figure that Timor-Leste should be proud of.

However, key challenges remain. Too many children are out of school. A third of all adults are illiterate. And only half of the teachers have proper qualifications.

This situation is compounded by a shortage of classrooms and teaching materials.

I am therefore very encouraged that the Government of Timor-Leste has made education a priority and developed a comprehensive strategy for the next 20 years to strengthen basic education, promote gender equality and tackle adult literacy.

I am very encouraged that President Ruak has promised as his number one priority, Education in this country.

In your successful move from conflict to stabilization, you have recognized that education holds the keys to future prosperity and well-being.

What holds true for education in Timor-Leste holds true for every country.

Education First will do its utmost to ensure that education is at the heart of the global social, political and development agendas.

At this time of austerity and fiscal constraint, we will strive to protect education budgets from unwise cuts. The entire UN system is determined to work together, to advance the goals I have set out for you today.

Statistics tells us why education is so important. Incomes rise. Productivity increases. Health improves. The list of quantifiable benefits is very long.

But I also take my cue from people – their basic hopes and aspirations.

Wherever I travel, I ask men and women what the United Nations can do for them.

The answer is always the same. Education.

In refugee camps, people tell me: get my children back in school. This is the first thing they ask for; education first.

In countries hit by earthquakes and other disasters, people insist: don't worry about us, don't worry about me; re-build the schools so my girl can learn.

We all know the reasons. Education saves lives. Education carries hope. Education builds dignity. Education is growth.

In our knowledge-based economies, education is the single best investment nations can make to build prosperous, healthy and equitable societies.

These are the stakes. We must meet them. Together, I am convinced, we can.

A new global movement for education must start today. As I look around this auditorium, I can see it already has.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Timor-Leste is on a promising trajectory. Its people are capable and determined. Its younger generations are increasingly making their mark, including in the new government.

The United Nations has stood with you in your struggle. We ourselves have been enriched by the experience. And we will continue to support you on your chosen path.

Viva Timor-Leste! Thank you.