

**The HongKong University  
of Science and Technology**

***Our Shared Humanity: Protecting the Rights  
of Refugees and Migrants***

***Distinguished Lecture***

***By J. Ramos-Horta, AO***

***Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1996)***

***Hong Kong, 7th September 2018***

Esteemed Faculty members, Students,  
Esteemed friend German Munoz-Diaz

***“An individual has not begun to live until he can  
rise above the narrow horizons  
of his particular individualistic concerns to the  
broader concerns of all humanity”***

***Rev. Martin Luther King***

Ladies and gentlemen,

Early April this year I was privileged to have taken part in the “Nobel Heroes Day” series held in Hong Kong. During that brief visit, my book ***Words of Hope in Challenging Times*** (Longueville Media, Sydney, 2018) was presented to an inspiring group of friends,

courtesy of Ambassador Dieter Lamle, Consul-General of the Federal Republic of Germany and his esteemed wife Dr. Ulrike Lamle, a renowned surgeon; I thank both most profusely for their generous hospitality.

It was in that pleasant setting that I met the founder and director of BRIGT, German A. Munoz-Dias; To German and his esteemed wife Anne, both kind hearts who have graciously arrange for this second visit to HK this year a warmest "muchas gracias", "un grand merci".

I began my remarks with a quote from Rev. King's most memorable speech "I have a dream" which was delivered on the 28th August 1963, at the footsteps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. King inspired millions of blacks and whites, Asians and Chicanos, Republicans and Democrats, and propelled many into action. Together they realised a part of the dreams of emancipation of the descendants of the slaves and other excluded peoples.

Through the power of non-violence, reconciliation and compassion Rev. King contributed to breaking centuries of the chains of slavery and racism and secured rights that had never before been recognised, as human beings, living as free men and women, with equal rights and opportunities.

Are Rev. King's messages relevant today? Are they relevant to the security and humanitarian challenges we face? Are they relevant to the 80 million refugees and displaced persons caused by man-made and natural disasters and extreme poverty?

Ladies and gentlemen,

We live in uncertain, dangerous times; the UN is being sidelined, made to look irrelevant, almost bankrupted by its Member States; multilateralism is being challenged by extremists on the two sides of the Atlantic; enabled by the very same XXI Century financial and social media tools easily accessible to all, trans-border terrorism and organised crime prey on fragile States, corrupting and undermining established democratic States.

We are witnesses to the inability of the major powers to end the senseless wars in Syria, South Sudan, Libya and Afghanistan, to name a few; we witness challenges and setbacks to liberal democracy, rule of law and human rights; dangerous rise of the political far right and xenophobia, intolerance, racism and racially instigated violence.

While globally significant progress has been made in the fight against extreme poverty, it continues to afflict hundreds of millions in Asia, Africa and Latin America causing mass exodus of the poor and the hopeless who ventured into dangerous desert treks and

treacherous waters in search of elusive safe heavens; and adding insult to injury, **inequality** has reached scandalous levels creating breeding grounds for anger, violence and instability.

We continue to inflict irreversible damage on the only known livable planet, sowing the seeds of the demise of our own civilisation. The 2015 Paris Treaty on Climate Change is not an overly ambitious attempt to slow down global warming:

***Holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels...recognising that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.***

As a member of the Least Developed Countries and of the Small Islands Developing States, representing the most climate vulnerable 600 million people of our Planet, the Timor-Leste Delegation to COP 21 actively negotiated in good faith with the then US Secretary of State John Kerry and numerous other State representatives to reach the historic Paris Agreement. To our dismay we saw how even this feeble Agreement to minimize global warming was reneged by the world's largest polluter.

I am deliberately using the word "we" to mean that we all have a collective responsibility to care for our collective home, but I am not saying that the Timorese

people, the peoples of the Pacific and Indian Ocean islands are equal scavengers of our Planet as the peoples of China, India, Japan, the US, UK, France, etc.

In reality, leaders and peoples of the rich enclaves of the world who over centuries have usurped 100 thousand times from Mother Earth do have far greater responsibility than the billions who for centuries have lived and continue to live on the periphery. And as we continue to be driven by greed and lack of vision to rescue our Planet, wars will be fought over arable land and fresh water; in the process a new category of refugees, climate change refugees, will join the other millions of the poor on the move.

The theme of our conversation today must resonate with many of you; some of you, women and men with kind hearts, surely you feel some anguish in the heart when you read about the personal stories of fellow human beings fleeing wars and/or religious persecution, seeking safety and freedom from complete destitution; but there are always others who simply shrug.

I have passed for a Latino of South America, Arab, Israeli and European. My extended family is a rich mosaic of skin colours, culture and languages in a country that is literally at the edge of the world, bathed by the great Pacific and Indian Oceans. Legend says

it was a crocodile that gave birth to the island called Timor, such as its picture-perfect crocodile shape.

I was my country's first Foreign Minister and served as Prime Minister and President. After leaving public office in 2012 up to 2017 I was invited to, and serve in, different UN missions.

I first set foot in a snow-covered New York in the dead of winter in early December 1975, with very little money and with no winter clothes. I had never seen snow in my life. For the first 15 years of my 24 years in exile, I lived in New York, Washington DC and at times off and on in the UK and France. During this time I crisscrossed the US in Greyhound buses and Amtrak, somewhat like Alex Tocqueville who in 1831 journeyed through the US and shared his observations in his classic *Democracy in America*. I overstayed in the US for 24 years. On occasion, with no work visa, a good hearted American got me a job translating from Portuguese, French and Spanish to English. I also did night time odd jobs.

My circumstances in arriving in the US may have been unique; but the circumstances of every person arriving in the US, Europe, Hong Kong, Australia, are unique. Most people do not leave home, parents, brothers and sisters, our loving extended family, without extreme causes. In my case, I didn't go to the US to pursue fortune in the fabled El Dorado, a better life for me and my family.

I was sent to the US on a mission, a holy cross that I carried day and night for 24 years until I was able to contemplate freedom from the majestic mountains of Timor-Leste.

The journey was a long and tortuous one, there were no rose petals on the road; I slept on many couches along the way, and ate good meals in many American homes. To say that my task was daunting would be an understatement; but the network of friends in the US, Europe, Japan and Australia who supported me and looked after my well-being kept me going, was very much part of my country being free today.

So it is particularly heartbreaking for me to see the institutionalisation of heartlessness in the US today toward its immigrant population, fomented by the language of derision on social media and at the dinner tables towards those whose skin is not white.

It is hard to describe the shock of hearing some US leaders state that non-whites arriving on American's shores are "criminals and rapists," "have AIDS" and other derogatory remarks

Violent crimes are frequent occurrences in many countries, rich and poor, small and large; and notably the US has a disproportionately high homicide rate and the facts show that the majority of the perpetrators of violent crime in the US are American

citizens, born, raised and alienated in the US, and not foreigners or “illegal immigrants”.

Even in placid, white Norway, a deranged blue-eyed maniac gunned down 70 innocent young people, boys and girls, and attempted to blow up the Prime Minister’s office building.

I am sad for America when I see legislation erasing a vital part of America’s character in the eyes of the world; not only slamming the doors on those seeking refuge, but grabbing back basic health care from their own poor, their children and elderly. The cruelty with which this legislation is being carried out is not only contrary to America’s place in history; it is worsened by the fact that it is being carried out by politicians who hold Bibles in their hands and publicly parade their Christianity while doing it.

Jorge Garcia ([link -- https://www.news-leader.com/story/news/local/michigan/wayne/2018/01/15/jorge-garcia-daca-deported-mexico-immigration/1033296001/](https://www.news-leader.com/story/news/local/michigan/wayne/2018/01/15/jorge-garcia-daca-deported-mexico-immigration/1033296001/)) arrived in the US at the age of 10, with his parents, without documentation. For thirty years he was a model citizen of his community, working as a landscape gardener, raising two children with his wife, an American citizen. He had no arrests; not even a traffic ticket. The family spent \$125,000 in legal costs to find him a path to citizenship, to no avail.



On Martin Luther King Day, Jorge was forced away from his wife and sobbing children. He was deported to Mexico, a foreign country to him, ripping a father from his family and separating a good man from his children.

I have often had to look into the face of suffering. Ours was a country of widows as one-third of our population died between the end of 1975 and 1999; I often meet widows struggling to feed their children, or those whose children needed to be flown to another country for an operation, or a young student needing help to stay in school. I am not a wealthy man. But I had more than they did. The decision on what to do was not a difficult one when I looked into their eyes. It was not possible to shut my door and still call myself a Christian.

Refugees and immigrants do not expect a bed of roses when they finally reach safer shores; only God knows what goes on in each individual's heart when on "D Day" he/she leaves behind the beloved ones.

I understand that one of the many obligations of national authorities is to ensure the security of their borders; and to this end, they have the sole right to decide who may enter their country. I also understand that not everyone claiming refugee status is a bona fide refugee. Many are economic refugees who just like the millions of Europeans who arrived uninvited, without a valid travel document, on the shores of

Australia, New Zealand and in the Americas and across Africa and Asia in centuries past.

We are share an increasingly crowded planet with ever scarcer resources, like arable land and water; in addition, wealth is scandalously unevenly distributed and this being so it was inevitable that the legions of the poor living on the periphery would defy treacherous routes and national borders seeking a better life in the land of the riches.

There might be too many in need of help; there might be 1,000 completely destitute orphans and one cannot help all. But can you help one child, one widow, one refugee seeking a safe haven and the promise of a better future? If all you can do is to help just one child or one desperate refugee, then do help with all your heart and a wonderful feeling of happiness envelopes your being.

Each of us can be an agent of change for the better, if not globally or regionally, if not nationally, we can be agents of positive change locally, in our own communities, or in communities of the forgotten, the poor, the unwanted.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are living witnesses to a phenomenal dislocation of peoples that ironically has parallel in history - the great migration across the world by Europeans of all stripes fleeing religious wars and poverty of past centuries. History is repeating itself in reverse.

Now the millions of unwanted and unwelcome, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Franz Fanon), barely surviving at the edges and shadows of the affluent and ostentatious minority of humanity, are inching themselves into the midst of the wealthy few, changing the demographics of the countries of the rich North.

Over the past 40 years as I travelled through Europe often by bus and train, I observed how a new Europe, multi-ethnic, multi-culture and multi-faith was gradually and inexorably emerging. This process is accelerating in ways that inevitably and understandably is causing anxieties and fears among many in Europe.

Whether this new Europe will be peaceful and embracing of all, living in peace, harmony and prosperity, depends on the Europeans of today, of different ethnic extractions and beliefs, whether they have the wisdom and courage to prepare the new future of Europe, sharing their common fate.

It will be a test of the quality of leadership, political wisdom, and a measure of the strength of the values of solidarity and justice that are the foundation of

modern Europe. It is a test for all in Europe, Christians and non-Christians, how they will jointly manage this fast changing cultural landscape; a rejuvenated and vibrant Europe or a Europe mired in racial, religious, social and political sectarianism and hatred will be determined by the Europeans of today.

**Angela Merkel**, a deeply religious and humble woman born and raised in the former German Democratic Republic, has shown unparalleled moral and political courage, wisdom and compassion, attributes of truly great leaders.

In contrast with other world leaders who failed in their encounter with History, the German Chancellor did not vacillate when confronted in 2015 with hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees at the gates of Europe fleeing the wars in the Middle East.

This was one of the most important decisions made by a German leader in Germany's post-war history. Towering over the political pygmies of the extreme right in Austria, Hungary, France, UK and US, Merkel ordered the opening of the borders of her country to desperate fellow human beings, women and children. Merkel saved tens of thousands of lives - and saved Europe from abdication and betrayal.

Had Chancellor Merkel abdicated moral responsibilities, what would have been the reaction of the peoples and leaders of Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, and of Greece and Italy, those on the frontline who are shouldering a disproportionate number of refugees from Syria, Iraq and Libya?

Ladies and gentlemen,

If we honestly reflect on the experiences of the last 50 years, the reasons the international community and governing elites in developing countries largely failed in eradicating illiteracy and extreme poverty, we may then be able to devise new development environments conducive to our peoples wanting to stay home.

Much has been written and proclaimed about the importance of prevention of conflicts and we all agree that prevention is better than cure. The High Level Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations appointed by the UN Secretary-General (2014-2016) which I had the privilege of chairing, was tasked, inter alia, to make recommendations with a view to enhancing UN role in prevention of conflicts, mediation, peace-making and peace-building.

My colleagues and I put due emphasis on the prevention of conflicts and mediation; we recommended that the UN invest more in its own conflict prevention capacities and provide support

where/when appropriate to State and non-State actors with a proven track record and credibility operating in the field.

It sounds simple, but it is easier said than done. South Sudan, Mali, Libya, Syria, are salient cases that illustrate our utter failure in anticipating and preventing the outbreak of armed conflicts.

The UN is far removed from the fragile communities and countries where the common prescriptions for conflicts are palpable. And the State-based regional bodies are too often constrained by rules and sensitivities and are unable to undertake timely initiatives on conflict prevention.

Hence it has been my informed view that National actors (religious denominations, civil society, credible retired political or military leaders) are best placed to engage in conflict prevention processes at community and national levels.

However, examples abound (South Sudan, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, etc) where impartial and credible national leaders are simply nowhere to be found; Often they are all very much part of the conflict.

Hence external mediators drawn from the UN and/or regional organisations, with in-depth understanding of the country and unassailable credibility among all

parties in the conflict, should be called upon to discreetly and patiently build the bridges of dialogue, connecting the parties in conflict.

However, the best antidote of conflicts are those legitimate national leaders committed to inclusive and non-discriminatory law and policies benefitting all equally, regardless of region, ethnicity and religion, and providing for fair and sustainable income distribution; these are sine quo non basis for peace and harmony in any country.

Root causes of conflicts and hence of regulated and unregulated migration are extreme poverty, morally offensive social gaps, discrimination and exclusion based on ethnicity and faith, cancerous corruption, impunity and arrogance of those in power.

Successful conflict prevention policies and strategies may produce the intended results when national Leaders are wise and humble, descend from their thrones and offices, leave their motorcades and connect and engage with the common people, listen more than talk, and respond to their legitimate grievances and basic needs.

Social tensions and violent armed conflicts do not suddenly erupt, they simmer over a long period of time and may remain circumscribed to a limited geographic and/or ethnic/religious area. But when

conflicts are localised and seemingly without a wider impact, unwise political leaders tend to shrug it off.

Weak State institutions in fragile countries are easily infiltrated and influenced by organised crime, money laundering, illegal gambling, sex slave, peoples smuggling and drug trafficking. Hence more investment is required to strengthen national capacities and State Institutions enabling them to preempt and resist organised crime.

If we fail to address the root causes of the phenomenon of refugees and forced migration, this will continue, as the poor have no choice but to leave their home regardless of the risks associated with it; and there will always be unscrupulous individuals and groups that see in the desperation of fellow human beings an opportunity to enrich themselves.

We criminalize and seek to punish these merchants of the abominable exploitation of refugees; but we do nothing to criminalize and punish States that fuel the flames of wars through weapons exports.

Rich and less rich countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia collectively spend more money on weapons purchases from the West and Russia than on education, primary health care, clean water and sanitation , reforestation and employment for the youth.



I do not wish to end my remarks with a too bleak and pessimistic note for in the midst of the cruelty and inhumanity of wars we hear countless stories of the courage and humanity of individuals whose generosity inspires and gives us hope about our humanity.

In Trumpland and across Europe millions are raising their voices against intolerance and racism; throughout Europe I have seen the better side of human beings, of Christians and Muslims living side by side and enjoying the beauty of freedom in the streets of Madrid, Barcelona, Lisbon, Berlin, Rome.

In Indonesia, home to the largest Muslim majority in the world, secularism and tolerance continue to prevail over extremism. Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists continue to share the vast Archipelago; during my visits to Jakarta I often wake up to the call for the early morning prayers in nearby mosques; and from my hotel window I see the roof of a Catholic Cathedral standing out in that predominately Muslim vibrant mega city.

Impoverished as the UN is today because Member States fail to pay their annual contributions, dedicated and courageous UN personnel are still in the frontline of wars mediating and saving lives in Syria, Yemen, Palestine, South Sudan, Congo, Mali, Myanmar/ Bangladesh. Many thousands more innocent people, women and children would have perished if the UN

were not there.

Humanity has faced greater challenges and tragedies in the past, but we recovered thanks to human resilience, ingenuity and solidarity; and we progressed each time because there were truly great leaders who gave us hope and guided us through the troubled times; and each time science and medicine advanced, diseases are prevented and conquered, hundreds of millions more gain access to education, are better informed today than our grandparents ever were.

Captive nations were freed through their sheer tenacity and ingenuity that prevailed over might. So there is hope that the challenges of today will once again prove to be precursors of more positive developments in the future.

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