



Nobel Peace Prize (1996)

Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta

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The 1996 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta. It was a turning point in the independence campaign because it provided a structure of legitimacy to that which had been a marginal issue in international politics. A crucial figure in this campaign is Yiannis Tavridis, then a student at the University of Bergen in Norway. Tavridis had been in contact with East Timorese exiles in Lisbon since 1989 and with TAPOL (the Indonesian Human Rights Campaign) in London since 1990. Tavridis and two other Oslo-based activists (media researcher, later journalism professor and writer, Elisabeth Eide and linguistics professor Lars Vikoer) were the permanent core of the Norwegian solidarity movement for East Timor. In 1991, Tavridis proposed East Timor as a candidate for a human rights prize awarded by the Rafto Foundation, which memorializes the economist Professor Thorolf Rafto, a champion of spiritual, political and economic freedoms. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy in Burma, received the Rafto Prize in 1990, and the Nobel Peace Prize the following year. Tavridis hoped that a nomination for East Timor would raise its profile and attract the attention of the Norwegian Nobel Committee. Tavridis also joined the Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH), and through it he organized nation-wide East Timor information campaigns on Norway's four university campuses in 1992 and 1995.

In 1993, the Rafto Foundation awarded its Rafto Prize to "The People of East Timor, represented by Jose Ramos-Horta." This legitimized the cause of East Timorese independence within conservative Scandinavian circles. In 1996, the Nobel Committee was highly sympathetic to the cause of East Timor. Some wanted to award the prize to Bishop Belo and to Xanana Gusmao, while others did not accept that the commander of an armed resistance group should receive the Peace Prize. The Committee also discussed the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi was trapped inside Burma and a previous Laureate, the

Dalai Lama, was unable to enter Tibet. They therefore decided on a joint award to Bishop Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta – one inside the territory to afford the East Timorese some protection, the other acting as a diplomat on the outside. It was a huge victory for the independence campaign. Indonesia's foreign minister Ali Alatas later said, "It was as if we had been besieged. The 1996 Nobel Peace Prize showed how seriously we had been besieged."

Further reading:

Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste. *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste*. Dili, 2005.

Federer, Juan. *The UN in East Timor: building Timor Leste, a fragile state*. Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2005.

Kohen, Arnold. *From the Place of the Dead: The Epic Struggles of Bishop Belo of East Timor*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1999.