

Prime minister asks bishop to mediate talks

DILI, East Timor - Timorese Prime Minister Jose Ramos-Horta has asked Bishop Alberto Ricardo da Silva of Dili to mediate negotiations between the government and a rebel leader.

Ramos-Horta said the rebel leader, Maj. Alfredo Alves Reinado, "has expressed his willingness to dialogue with the government should the Catholic Church be the mediator."

He told journalists March 13 that he met with Bishop da Silva the previous day "to explain the government's stand" on the issues.

UCA News, an Asian church news agency, reported on the prime minister's statements March 14.

A series of protests in Dili last May evolved into widespread violence after then-Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri dismissed 600 of the 1,400 members of the army, who were protesting what they said was widespread discrimination against troops from the western part of the country.

Reinado, a key figure in the revolt that plunged East Timor into chaos, broke out of a jail near Dili in August with 56 other prisoners, some of whom were charged in incidents of looting and burning during the May violence.

Ramos-Horta said that if the rebel group leader surrenders and hands over all weapons the government will stop its military operations against him, and will protect and treat him humanely.

Days before the prime minister's meeting with Bishop da Silva, Father Domingos Soares Maubere, spokesman for the Dili Diocese, told reporters the church was ready to mediate between the government and the rebel group if officially asked by both parties. About 96 percent of the Timorese are Catholic.

Father Maubere also expressed concern about refugees who have been staying in tents for almost a year because of the prolonged violence. An estimated 150,000 people were displaced and at least 20 were killed in the violence. An international peacekeeping force was deployed in the country.

From his hide-out, Reinado told the local Timor Post newspaper March 12 that he was very happy to hear of the church's willingness to negotiate.

The church has a special place in the people's hearts, he said.

"I believe that the Catholic Church, as an independent body, will be a good mediator for the dialogue," he said.