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Teary Ramos Horta leaves hospital

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At first joking, but then fighting back tears, East Timor's President Jose Ramos Horta has told of the frantic battle to save his life following an assassination attempt in Dili.

Mr Ramos Horta, speaking in Darwin, also issued an appeal to his people in East Timor to forgo violence and hatred.

The President, looking thin but able to walk, today paid tribute to the Australian doctors and nurses in Darwin and Dili who treated him after he was shot by rebel soldiers in Dili on February 11.

Airlifted to Darwin in a critical condition, Mr Ramos Horta underwent several operations in Royal Darwin Hospital for at least two bullet wounds and is now on the road to recovery.

Mr Ramos Horta was discharged from Darwin Private Hospital today but will remain in the city for several weeks for further treatment.

Wearing a loose-fitting shirt and trousers, Mr Ramos Horta walked gingerly into the nearby Royal Darwin Hospital this morning, refusing a wheelchair, and joked with the 25 doctors and nurses who gathered around him.

He presented the hospital with a photo of himself meeting the Pope at the Vatican in January, and gave some Timor coffee to doctors and nurses.

"It's the best coffee in the world," Mr Ramos Horta told them. "I have to also tell you that Timor coffee already has been found to have strong Viagra content, so it is very healthy," he joked.

But Mr Ramos Horta grew more serious as he recalled in detail the aftermath of the assassination attempts on him and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, who escaped unscathed when his convoy was attacked the same day.

"I remember every detail from the moment I was shot," the President said of the hours after he was shot by rebel soldiers outside his home in Dili.

"I remember everything ... the ambulance ... a very old battered ambulance. No paramedic. A Portuguese special police unit, GNR ... luckily it had a paramedic who jumped in the ambulance and gave me the first assistance.

"On the way to the heliport I fell off the chair a few times because there were no belts.

"I remember even though I was bleeding I was holding on tight.

"And I was telling the driver - go slow.

"But maybe he was wise because it was only a matter of minutes for me to arrive there," Mr Ramos Horta said of the Aspen Medical Centre in Dili, where Australian doctors treated him in the first critical period after the shooting.

"And then I arrived here in your hands," he told the Darwin Hospital staff.

"I thank all of you."

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Fighting back tears and putting his hands to his face, Mr Ramos Horta appeared unable to speak until, eventually, a nurse said: "You have done very well."

"Thank you," Mr Ramos Horta replied.

The President thanked all at the hospital, mentioning a cleaner - "a humble man" - who he thought was from Sudan.

Of the Australian doctors at Dili's Aspen Medical centre, he said: "If that centre had not been there I don't know what would have happened."

Mr Ramos Horta said he was indebted to Australia, where he had been treated "very well ... professionally".

He also thanked the people of East Timor.

"There are so many thousands of people in Timor - the bishops, the priests, the nuns, the common people who have prayed for me.

"I thank all of my people. I will be back soon."

Asked if he had a message for his country, he said: "My message to my people is 'Please forgo violence and hatred with weapons, machetes, with arson - we only destroy each other and the country'."

AAP

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/03/19/1205602461041.html>