

East Timor files world court case vs. Australia

By MIKE CORDER

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THE HAGUE, Netherlands — East Timor has launched legal action claiming that Australian agents illegally seized documents from a lawyer who represents the impoverished Asian nation in a dispute over a multibillion-dollar oil-and-gas deal, the International Court of Justice announced Wednesday.

The case at the United Nations' highest court is the latest step in a legal battle between the neighbors over a 2006 deal that shares seabed oil-and-gas reserves between the countries.

That dispute is under arbitration. Australia enraged East Timor earlier this month by raiding the home of its legal representative in the arbitration and seizing documents on the eve of a hearing.

The lawyer, Bernard Collaery, claims that Australia bugged the Cabinet office of the fledgling East Timorese government before negotiations that paved the way for the oil and gas revenue sharing deal.

On the same day Collaery's office was raided, the secret service also raided the home of a former Australian spy who made the bugging claims. The spy's identity hasn't been released.

East Timorese Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao has condemned the secret service raids as "counterproductive and uncooperative."

Speaking to Australian Broadcasting Corp. after the spy's arrest, Collaery called the secret service action, "an attempt to intimidate our witness and to prevent the evidence going forward" in the arbitration case.

East Timor is using the alleged espionage as basis for challenging the validity of its revenue deal with Australia at the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

East Timor wants the court to order Australia to return the documents and apologize for the raid.

It also asked the court to impose urgent "provisional measures" before a final ruling including ordering Australia to seal any documents or data taken from the lawyer's office and hand them to the court and to destroy any copies made of the documents or data.

Dili also wants the court to seek assurances from Australia that it will not intercept communications between East Timor and its legal advisers.

No date was immediately set for a hearing. Cases at the International Court of Justice usually take months or years to resolve. The court's decisions are final and legally binding.