

## East Timor-Australia Spying Scandal

Australian spying row spreads as Timorese leaders file a petition at The Hague.

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It seems Australia likes to spy on its neighbors. After Indonesia, it is East Timor's turn to criticize Australia for alleged espionage targeting its leaders.



Image Credit: Twitter @TempoSemana

Australia is **accused** of conducting an operation that targeted East Timor's Cabinet when the two countries were negotiating a gas treaty in 2004. After learning about the spying, the East Timor government wants to revoke a deal worth billions of dollars that it signed with Australia, claiming that the latter had illegally obtained intelligence to gain advantage during the negotiations. The petition is now lodged at The Hague.

Things became more heated early this month when the Australia Security Intelligence Office raided the Canberra office of the lawyer who is representing East Timor in the case. Australia said it merely acted to **defend** its national security but East Timor is now demanding the return of the documents seized in the law office.

The spying revelation elicited a strong response from Timorese leaders. Former East Timor president Jose Ramos-Horta criticized Australia's **hypocrisy**: "Australia likes to lecture Timor-Leste and other countries about transparency and integrity in public life. Well, this has not been a very good example of transparency and honesty."

"When you try to listen in to phone conversations of the president of Indonesia, a friendly country, or his own wife, or when you spy on a friendly neighbor like Timor-Leste which Australia helped to free in 1999 and which Australia claimed to be a friend, well it really undermines 10 years of our relationship," Ramos-Horta added, referring to Australia's spying activities in Indonesia which sparked a separate **diplomatic row** last month.

It has actually been a very challenging two-month period for Australian diplomats in Southeast Asia: they have either had to explain or deny the various spying allegations involving their government and a number of countries in the **region**. Aside from Indonesia and East Timor, the Malaysian government also summoned its Australian envoy about the reported intelligence sharing **network** maintained by the United States in the region, which included the posting of espionage equipment inside the U.S. Embassy in Kuala Lumpur.

Apparently, Australia is a major player in this U.S.-led surveillance network, which monitors **communication signals** in the Asia-Pacific.

East Timor citizens immediately held a peaceful protest outside the Australian Embassy in Dili to condemn Australia's illegal spying operations. The protesters also identified Australia Aid as an "**espionage agent**;" its aid work in 2004 was purportedly used as a cover to tap the phones of East Timor leaders.

The issue also highlighted the continuing controversy over Australia's "**occupation**" of the Timor Sea.

"Australia has been stealing the oil and gas from the Timor Sea, in an area which belongs to Timor-Leste under international legal principles. Sadly, Australia has shown its manner and its greed to make our small and poor country in this region lose our resources and sovereignty," said the **Movement Against the Occupation of the Timor Sea**.

It's unlikely that Australia will issue a formal apology in relation to the East Timor espionage, in the same way that it **refused** to express remorse over the leaked surveillance report involving Indonesia. But Australia should **rethink its stance**, as failure to act on this matter will only **antagonize** what were once friendly neighbors.