

UN court postpones East Timor spy case

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The architect of East Timor's independence movement has welcomed the decision by Australia and his country to postpone court action over their spy row and pursue an amicable resolution.

East Timor dragged Canberra to the International Court of Justice in The Hague to seek the return of sensitive documents seized by Australia in a raid on the office of a lawyer working for East Timor.

The documents related to a controversial oil and gas treaty between the two countries that East Timor wanted torn up.

Jose Ramos-Horta, the former president of East Timor, said such disputes often arose between friends.

"You just have to get over it," Mr Ramos-Horta said. "The relationship between Timor-Leste and Australia is too important."

The UN's highest court postponed the hearing on Friday.

"The ICJ decided to grant the parties' request to postpone the oral proceedings in the case," it said in a statement in the Hague.

Lawyers were to argue their cases at the hearing's opening, set for September 17.

But in a joint letter dated Monday, both Dili and Canberra asked for a postponement "to enable them to seek an amicable settlement", the court said.

In an interim ruling in March, ICJ judges ordered Canberra to stop interfering in East Timor's dealings with its lawyer and to ensure the content of the seized documents be put under seal.

East Timor opened a case against Australia in December after a raid on the Canberra offices of Bernard Collaery, in which electronic and paper documents were seized.

East Timor contended the seizure violated its sovereignty and rights "under international and any relevant domestic law".

At the heart of the David and Goliath dispute was the treaty signed in 2006 between Dili and Canberra, four years after East Timor's independence from Indonesia.

Australia allegedly used an aid program as cover to bug East Timor's cabinet offices so it could listen in on discussions about the treaty.

East Timor accused Australia of spying to gain a commercial advantage during 2004 negotiations over the Timor Sea gas treaty, called the Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea, or CMATS, which covered a vast gas field between the two nations.

East Timor now wanted the treaty scrapped.

The two countries were involved in a separate, behind-closed-doors case on the issue before the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which was in the same building as the ICJ.

Mr Ramos-Horta said he was confident both countries would find a mutually beneficial resolution to their disagreements, including the maritime boundary in the Timor Sea.

"A great country like Australia should be able to show leadership and pragmatism and compassion," Mr Ramos-Horta said.

"Great countries don't bully other countries. I believe that [Prime Minister] Tony Abbott and [Foreign Affairs Minister] Julie Bishop will be able to work out a great compromise."

The ICJ did not give a new date.

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This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/world/un-court-postpones-east-timor-spy-case-20140906-10dad3.html>