

## Australians urged to pressure government on East Timor boundary dispute



(Source: AAP)

Australia and East Timor have quietly begun talks towards a possible settlement of their boundary in the Timor Sea, an issue of immense importance to Timor-Leste.

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Australia and East Timor have quietly begun talks towards a possible settlement of their boundary in the Timor Sea, an issue of immense importance to Timor-Leste.

And an advocacy group for East Timor -- in Australia -- wants Australians to stand up.

Revelations this week that Australia and East Timor have begun talks on a framework for negotiating their boundary dispute in the Timor Sea have raised hopes for a new deal.

The revelations came as East Timor's parliament reportedly authorised an immediate start to negotiations on the issue that has troubled the country since independence in 2002.

In Australia, Timor Sea Justice Campaign spokesman Tom Clarke is urging Australians to pressure their government to ensure East Timor gets a fair deal this time.

"I think, ultimately, the solution here is about a permanent maritime boundary. One of the real problems has been that Timor's really been jostled into a series of temporary resource-sharing agreements. And all of these agreements ultimately short-change East Timor out of billions and billions of dollars that they're legally entitled to. East Timor has consistently argued that a permanent boundary should be drawn halfway between the two

coastlines, and that's what current international law overwhelmingly favours. However, Australia's been really quite stubborn about hanging onto this very outdated notion of its continental shelf."

Australia's continental shelf, the present boundary, extends far closer to East Timor than to Australia.

A boundary halfway between them would put most of the oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea, in East Timor territory, worth another \$40-billion.

The two countries negotiated treaties that were ratified in 2002 and 2007, but, in both cases, East Timor was fighting security problems and was in a weak state for negotiating.

Australia had withdrawn its recognition of International Court of Justice jurisdiction over maritime boundaries prior to the 2002 deal, depriving East Timor of legal options.

East Timor senior legal adviser Janelle Saffin told a Sydney symposium in August she believes Australia remains unlikely to accept third-party arbitration quickly.

"It's difficult, because Australia expressed what they call a 'reservation' to the compulsory-dispute settlement processes -- particularly, the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea -- on issues to do with maritime-boundary delimitation. So there is that reservation there that Australia expressed in 2002, so that makes it difficult. But, ultimately, it's about negotiation."

Attorney-General George Brandis recently expressed support for Australia's standing position on the boundary, noting it was based on the continental shelf.

But East Timor has already threatened to tear up the treaty between the two countries on the basis that Australia spied on East Timor during negotiations in 2004.

That revelation came out of the work of United States whistleblower Edward Snowden.

East Timor's negotiators say they are confident the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea and the International Court of Justice would rule in their favour.

But East Timor's ambassador to Australia, Abel Guterres, says his country prefers to work it out with Australia.

"Nothing's impossible. Issues arise that can be dealt with. The two countries can talk and get a solution. I think that's what we are hoping for. And I think, by dialogue, you know, you find ways to come to a solution that's satisfactory to both sides."

Mr Guterres says the oil and gas money is vital to East Timor.

"Of course, Timor Leste, its resources are very important to underpin its entire economy and to give better hope for our children. Especially, we want the kids to live beyond the age of five."

East Timor is the second-poorest country in Asia.

Tom Clarke, with the Timor Sea Justice Campaign, says an improved deal for East Timor would benefit Australia as well as in building a more secure neighbour.

"If you think about the great role that Australia has played in East Timor over the years since the intervention, in terms of helping Timor transition to peace and independence, and you think of the wonderful aid programs that many Australians have assisted with in Timor, there's a lot of wonderful work going on. But, unfortunately, Australia's position, when it comes to the oil and gas dispute, it really undercuts and undermines all of those really good efforts. Australia is putting millions of dollars into East Timor through humanitarian and aid programs, yet, at the same time, our country's taking billions away in contested oil and gas revenues."

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