

Tomorrow's 15th anniversary of East Timor's historic ballot highlights Australia's unfinished business in the Timor Sea

Tomorrow will mark the 15th anniversary of East Timor's historic vote for independence, but Timor's ongoing struggle to become a true sovereign nation – complete with sea boundaries -- continues.

The Timor Sea Justice Campaign's spokesperson in Melbourne, Tom Clarke, said the tremendous goodwill generated by Australia's peace-keeping mission in East Timor following the ballot in 1999 had since been jeopardised by Australia's bullish approach to contested oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea.

"It's a bit like stepping up to chase away a school-yard bully, only to steal the victim's lunch money yourself," said Mr Clarke.

Australia has consistently refused to establish permanent maritime boundaries with East Timor in accordance with international law.

"Rather than simply drawing a line half way between the two coastlines as international law prescribes, Australia has chosen to short-change East Timor out of billions of dollars through dubious gas and oil treaties," said Mr Clarke.

For many East Timorese the Timor Sea dispute is inherently tied up with their independence struggle.

"Here we are fifteen years after their decisive vote for independence, yet when the Timorese look at a map of their nation there are no lines to indicate its maritime boundaries," said Mr Clarke.

Beyond symbolism, the prolonged dispute has also trapped approximately \$40 billion of government revenue -- out of reach of the second poorest nation in Asia as it grapples with grave health challenges.

Mr Clarke said that if Australia's Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, wants to preserve the perceived legacy of his political mentor, former PM John Howard, he needs to finish the job in East Timor by establishing permanent maritime boundaries.

"If Tony Abbott wants to not only save John Howard's legacy, but to build on it, he simply needs to give East Timor a fair go. This issue isn't about charity -- it's simply about what East Timor is legally entitled to," said Mr Clarke.

Mr Clarke urged the Prime Minister to resubmit Australia to the maritime boundary jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea -- both of which Australia preemptively withdrew from in 2002 -- to demonstrate he's ready to negotiate in good faith.

"It's hard to take seriously any of the legal arguments put forward by the Australian Government whilst it refuses to submit to the independent umpire. So this would be a key step in getting fresh negotiations off on the right track," said Mr Clarke.

Timor Sea Justice Campaign

A fair go for East Timor.

The TSJC is comprised of concerned Australians of various ages, backgrounds and political persuasions who all want our Government to give East Timor a fair go. Specifically, we're calling for the establishment of permanent maritime boundaries in accordance with current international law.

For further information and comments: Tom Clarke on tom@dukestmedia.com or +61(0)422 545 763
www.TimorSeaJustice.com