

TEMPO **TIMOR**

Husi Imiba Imi

HORTA : "I'M HOPEFUL AND CONVINCED WE CAN WORK OUT AN IMPROVED MARITIME AGREEMENT" FEATURED

Written by **Tempo Semanal** | Kwartu, 23 Setembru 2015 08:37 |



East Timor former President DR. Jose Ramos Horta shake hand with East Timor President Taur Matan Ruak

By Caitlin Taylor and Somerset Lewis

Time is running out for Timor-Leste and Australia to reach an agreement surrounding maritime boundaries, as disputes continue over claims to lucrative oil reserves below the Timor Sea.

In 2006 the two countries signed the 'Treaty on Certain Maritime Agreements in the Timor Sea', dividing up revenue from the Greater Sunrise oil field and joint development areas.

But the Timor-Leste Government has since launched arbitration against Australia, after claims of bugging by Asian officials in Dili's cabinet room in 2004, to sway negotiations in their favour.

Currently oil and gas pay for 95 per cent of Timor-Leste's state revenues, but should oil projects in the Timor Sea remain stalled, the country's Petroleum Fund could expire by the mid-2020's, according to the Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis.

Speaking to Tempo Semanal, former president and Nobel Peace laureate Jose Ramos-Horta warned that as negotiations continue without any end in sight, valuable revenue is being wasted.

"Timor-Leste is running out of time, with the oil price dramatically dropping we don't have unlimited resources to pay lawyers or to wait, so we have to find better ways to protect our interests," he said.

"We're entitled to a median line with equal distance between Australia and Timor-Leste, and it's possible to reach an agreement but the problem is that it could take forever."

Under current arrangements, 50 per cent of the revenue from the Greater Sunrise project would go to Timor-Leste, but the disagreement over the maritime boundary means the field is yet to be developed and is unlikely to produce returns in the near future.

As a result, Timor-Leste is seeking to revisit the treaty to establish an official boundary half way between the two countries – which is common measure under international law – placing more of the Greater Sunrise project under Timorese control.

This in turn would see Timor-Leste gain control of reserves worth more than \$40 billion.

However, Australia remains steadfast in its position, with Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Attorney General George Brandis issuing a joint statement in June stating, "Australia remains committed to [the treaty] and is disappointed that Timor-Leste is attempting to re-open it."

But Mr Ramos-Horta says Australia is increasingly acknowledging that there should be improvements on resource sharing between the nations.

"The best way to guarantee peace and stability in Timor-Leste, to genuinely help it out of poverty, is to allow Timor-Leste to have a better share of the resources in the Timor Sea," he said.

"It is obvious that Timor-Leste [is] not benefiting from a good share of the revenue."

In July, South Australian Independent Senator, Nick Xenophon lambasted the position of Australia's two key political parties on the median line, saying it deprives Timor-Leste of revenue, which could be put towards alarming gaps in the country's health and education systems.

"Labor has, in effect, given bi-partisan cover to the Coalition's unconscionable position on this issue, one that is damaging our reputation in the region," said the Senator.

Mr Ramos-Horta says Australia needs to take greater responsibility for its position within the region in order to strengthen ties with Timor-Leste.

"If fair-minded people in Australia were to speak out and make this into an issue in Australia in every home, with the media talking about it, the government would quickly find ways to renegotiate CMAT," he said.

"A treaty is not a bible... you can revise it."

"I am convinced, being Australia a true friend of Timor-Leste, and being Australians known as very fair-minded, if we sit down and talk quietly and patiently, as neighbours and friends, who shed blood for each other in our history, we can work out a much improved Maritime Agreement and one that not only encompasses oil and gas revenues but that also covers maritime security", Said Nobel Laureate Ramos-Horta.

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