

Timor-Leste, hiding in plain sight on the world map

Though new and small, the Southeast Asian nation needs clear maritime boundaries

By Rui Maria de Araujo - - *Wednesday, October 7, 2015*

Most people will not have even heard of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, let alone be able to point out where it is on the world map.

Timor-Leste, the nation whose government I lead, is a half-island nation-state in Southeast Asia. Our closest neighbors are Indonesia to our north and west, and Australia, to the south, across the Timor Sea.

Thanks to the resilience of our people, and our friends around the world, Timor-Leste has been on the world map since we became the 191st member-state of the United Nations in 2002.

But while our land borders are defined, we still do not have maritime borders. We have not yet achieved full sovereignty.

Like Americans, the Timorese are a very proud people, patriotic in every sense. Like the United States, we were colonized and fought fiercely for our independence. Ours came at the end of close to 500 years of Portuguese rule, followed by a 24-year long occupation by Indonesia.

Now that we are an independent state, there is much we can learn from nations such as the United States. We, too, will not allow our sovereignty to be challenged. Freedom and independence came at a very high price for us. We lost hundreds of thousands of lives during our struggle for independence against foreign occupation.

Creating the architecture of an independent and fully sovereign nation-state has not been easy. We had to start from scratch and establish a system of parliamentary and semi-presidential democracy, a civil service, a justice system and social services from the ashes of war.

We had to look after our veterans, our elderly and provide a stable environment for our burgeoning young population — over 61 percent of our population is under 25 years of age.

Now, 13 years since independence, we are a peaceful, open society.

We have achieved average economic growth rates of around 10 percent over the last eight years, and developed a highly transparent and accountable public financial management system, and have one of the highest representations of women in parliament in the world.

We are now ready to conclude our struggle for sovereignty by negotiating maritime boundaries with Indonesia and Australia.

World attention is focused on the dispute in the South China Sea, but regrettably, there is an equally drawn-out dispute about sovereignty in the Timor Sea — a 435-mile-wide, oil-rich stretch of water that separates Timor-Leste and Indonesia from the northern coast of Australia.

Timor-Leste shares an island with Indonesia and both nations have devoted considerable time and energy to finalizing our land borders, which are 98 percent settled. In August, Indonesia President Joko Widodo

and I agreed to commence negotiations to finalize the maritime boundaries we share north of Timor and in the south in the Timor Sea.

However, the Australian government has so far not agreed to negotiate maritime boundaries with Timor-Leste.

This is despite the fact that Australia has successfully negotiated maritime boundaries with all its other neighbours, based on equidistance principles in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and international law.

The Timorese and the Australian people are bound by loyalty and friendship dating back to when we fought together against a common enemy during the Second World War. Nevertheless, successive Australian governments since 2002 have let the Timorese down when it comes to acknowledging Timor-Leste's sovereignty in the Timor Sea.

We were very disappointed when in March 2002, on the eve of Timor-Leste's independence becoming internationally recognized, Australia withdrew from the maritime jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea.

This has meant we have been unable to ask an international court to decide where an equitable boundary would lie under international law in the Timor Sea between Timor-Leste and Australia.

Timor-Leste still only has "temporary resource sharing" agreements, known as the Timor Sea treaties, that divide revenue from the exploitation of oil and gas resources on Timor-Leste's side of the median line in the Timor Sea between Australia and Timor-Leste.

The Timor Sea treaties are, of course, vexed, and the Timorese government has triggered arbitration clauses in the treaties over allegations Australia spied on us during treaty negotiations in 2004.

Australia has bilaterally negotiated maritime boundaries with all its other maritime neighbors, with the only exception being Timor-Leste.

What we are asking is simple. We want to settle our maritime boundary with Australia in accordance with international law.

We are hopeful that under the leadership of the new prime minister of Australia, Malcolm Turnbull, we will be able to engage in constructive and fair negotiations so that we can close the maritime boundary gap between our nations.

Then, even if someone does not know where Timor-Leste is, she or he will at least be able to find us in the world map as a fully sovereign nation with permanently defined land and maritime boundaries.

• *Rui Maria de Araujo is prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.*