

Australia illegally occupying maritime territory of Timor-Leste, protesters say

Demonstrators rallying outside Australian embassy in Dili say their future is being stolen from the Timor Sea

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Thousands of demonstrators gathered outside the Australian embassy in Dili on Tuesday, accusing the Australian government of “illegally occupying” Timor Leste territory by refusing to renegotiate maritime boundaries over oil and gas reserves.

The two countries have been locked in dispute over the maritime boundary, which was agreed to in 1972 between Australia and Indonesia before Timorese independence, and which had an impact on how oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea were split in a 2006 treaty between Australia and Timor Leste.

There is now no permanent boundary agreement, and the protesters demanded on Tuesday that one be set at the median boundary between the two countries, in line with the usual practice in international law under the 1982 UN convention on the laws of the sea (UNCLOS).

Timor Leste is now engaged in maritime boundary negotiations with its other neighbour and former occupier, Indonesia.

The activist group Movement Against the Occupation of the Timor Sea (MKOTT) accused Australia of “illegally occupying Timor-Leste’s maritime territory” to take their resources.

“As a big and powerful country in this region, Australia shouldn’t be using its power to continue to steal our future from the Timor Sea,” the MKOTT coordinator Juvinal Dias said.

The protests have been timed to coincide with the anniversary of Australia’s decision to withdraw from UNCLOS-set procedures of compulsory dispute resolution through an international body.

Australia took this step just weeks before Timor Leste gained independence, according to the Timor-Leste government, and it says the Australian government has since refused to enter into bilateral negotiations on a permanent maritime boundary.

MKOTT called for the Australian government to respect the jurisdiction and authority of international law under UNCLOS, and to “engage in honest and open negotiations about maritime boundaries”.

In February, the Australian opposition foreign affairs spokeswoman, Tanya Plibersek, said

a Labor government would be prepared to submit to international adjudication or arbitration if “good faith” negotiations were not successful. The Timor Leste government welcomed the announcement.

Timor Leste has accused Australia of bugging a cabinet room to spy on its delegates during 2004 negotiations on the existing treaty. It took Australia to the International Court of Justice, saying its sovereignty had been infringed, but dropped the case last year. A second case before the permanent court of arbitration continues.

The independent Australian senator Nick Xenophon has called for a royal commission into the spying allegations.

The rally in the Timor-Leste capital is expected to go for two days, and has support from other protests held across Australia and Asia this week.