

E. Timor urges court to end sea border row with Australia

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East Timor on Monday urged an international court to help end a decade-long dispute with Australia over a maritime border which cuts through lucrative oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea.

Australia argued the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) based in The Hague -- the world's oldest international tribunal -- has no jurisdiction in the battle that has soured ties between the two maritime neighbours.

East Timor's independence resistance hero and former prime minister Xanana Gusmao told the tribunal that the country was just seeking what "is rightfully ours".



Australian Embassy Chancery Vehicles

East Timor, which gained independence from Indonesian occupation in 2002, is impoverished and depends heavily on oil and gas exports.

In 2006, it signed the Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS) treaty with Australia, which also covers the vast Greater Sunrise gas field between the two nations, worth billions of dollars.

East Timor now wants that treaty torn up after accusing Australia of spying to gain commercial advantage during the 2004 negotiations.

It has appealed to the PTA to take up and settle the dispute under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

- Binding treaties -

Australia's representative, former UN ambassador Gary Quinlan, told the panel at a preliminary hearing in The Hague that Canberra believed all current treaties, including the CMATS, were legal, binding and valid and should be respected.

Australia "contested the competence of the commission," he said, adding "Australia's view is that there is no proper basis from which Timor-Leste is entitled to bring these claims."

Dili's claim "violates its treaty commitments, specifically CMATS, under which both countries have committed not to bring proceedings against each other," Quinlan said.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said earlier Monday that even if the PCA decides it has jurisdiction "its final report on that matter is not binding."

Dili officially dropped its spying case against Canberra before the UN's highest International Court of Justice in June 2015 after Australia returned sensitive documents.

The hearings continued in private Monday and the tribunal will decide at an unknown future date whether to take up the case.



East Timor has accused Australia of spying to gain a commercial advantage during 2004 negotiations over the Timor Sea gas treaty, which covers a vast gasfield between the two