



East Timor, Australia open talks on maritime border dispute

August 29, 2016

By Mike Corder, Associated Press



In this March 24, 2016 file photo, a protester holds a poster during a rally outside the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia as dozens of people show their support to East Timor in the dispute over oil and gas revenue-sharing between the two countries. East Timor and Australia opened conciliation talks Monday, Aug. 29 in their bitter legal battle to set a permanent

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — [East Timor](#) and Australia opened conciliation talks Monday in their bitter legal battle to set a permanent maritime boundary that will carve up billions of dollars in [oil and gas reserves](#) underneath the seabed.

East Timor, one of the world's most impoverished nations, is seeking to draw a border midway between the two countries that would give it more of the sea bed than under current agreements with its wealthy neighbor to the south.

Australia says the government in [Dili](#) should stick to treaties negotiated between the two countries that it says fairly carves up revenue and provides resource companies a stable legal framework that gives them confidence to invest in exploiting the rich underground reserves.

The acrimonious dispute has long soured relations between East Timor and Australia, which played a pivotal role in helping East Timor gain independence after a long occupation by Indonesia.

The relationship plumbed new depths in 2013 amid allegations that Australian spies bugged the East Timorese Cabinet ahead of crucial revenue-sharing negotiations. Australia rejects the claim, which is the focus of a separate arbitration case between the two countries in which East Timor is seeking to invalidate a Timor Sea treaty.

"We have not come to The Hague to ask for favors or special treatment. We have come to seek our rights under international law," Xanana Gusmao, a former guerrilla leader who became his country's first president when Indonesian rule ended in 2002, told a panel of five experts at a conciliation commission convened under an international treaty governing the laws of the seas.

It is not clear when the commission will issue its non-binding ruling.

Australia argues that the Hague-based panel does not have jurisdiction to set the border and that Australia is committed to upholding existing treaties between the two countries, which comply with international law.

The treaties, "really are a model example of how two states can work together for mutual benefit despite different views on how to finalize boundaries," said Australian foreign ministry representative Gary Quinlan.