

## Timor-Leste fights Australia's theft

INTERNATIONAL



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Up to 30,000 people rallied on 22 and 23 March at the Australian embassy in Dili to protest Australia's theft of billions of dollars in royalties and tax revenue from oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

The protests coincided with the anniversary of the Australian government's 2002 decision to withdraw from the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which allowed it to strong-arm newly independent East Timor out of its rightful majority share of the reserves.

Under the direction of then foreign minister Alexander Downer, the 2002 decision left East Timor with no legal avenues to negotiate its claim.

Timor-Leste is now demanding that a permanent boundary be set at the median line between the two countries in accordance with the UNCLOS.

Former Timorese president Xanana Gusmão called on protesters to "stand firm and raise one voice" to demand that Australia re-enter negotiations to redraw the maritime boundary.

Protesters shouted slogans including "Negotiations now" and "Hands off Timor oil". Organisers of the Dili protests included student leaders and veterans of East Timor's independence movement.

"This is possibly the biggest demonstration we've seen since we declared independence", Movement Against the Occupation of the Timor Sea coordinator Juvinal Dias told AFP. Dias accused Australia of "illegally occupying Timor-Leste's maritime territory".

Last week's protests constitute "a struggle increasingly seen by Timorese people as necessary to complete our independence from foreign domination", Timor Sea Justice Campaign organiser Tomas Freitas told SBS.

Last month prime minister Malcolm Turnbull offered to hold "frank and open" discussions with Timor-Leste but declined to discuss specifically the maritime boundary issue.

After the 2002 Timor Sea Treaty handed Australia 82 percent of revenues from Greater Sunrise, another treaty, the Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS), was negotiated in 2006. The CMATS gave a partial concession to East Timor by allowing it 50 percent of the revenues. However, it completely excluded East Timor's government and oil company from participation in the development and required Timor to postpone for 50 years all negotiations for a permanent settlement of the boundary.

It was later revealed by the ABC's Lateline program in November last year that Canberra spied on Timor-Leste officials during the 2004 negotiations leading up to the ratification of the CMATS Treaty. Listening devices were planted in East Timor's cabinet office under the guise of refurbishment.

The Timor-Leste government now demands that the CMATS be torn up and Australia re-enter negotiations for a new maritime border.

In Melbourne hundreds of protesters gathered on 24 March outside the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as part of a series of protests in the region held in solidarity with the Dili demonstrations.