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East Timor to Malcolm Turnbull: Let's start talks on maritime boundary

Tom Allard

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East Timor's Prime Minister has written to his Australian counterpart Malcolm Turnbull asking him to open talks on a permanent maritime boundary between the two countries.

News of the official communique from Dr Rui Maria de Araujo comes in the wake of the [opposition's announcement](#) that, if elected, it will enter good faith talks with East Timor over a new border and submit to an independent determination under international law if the talks fail.

It also follows the [start of negotiations between Indonesia and East Timor](#) over their sea boundaries.

At stake are multibillion-dollar oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea that East Timor's government believes would be located overwhelmingly in its territory if the boundaries were set according to international law.

Two months before East Timor became an independent nation in 2002, Australia withdrew from the dispute-settling jurisdiction under the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Since then, it has also refused to negotiate a bilateral agreement on a permanent boundary with East Timor. Instead, the two countries have signed two treaties - in 2002 and 2007 - sharing oil and gas revenues.

East Timor's ambassador to Australia Abel Guterres, who announced the correspondence from Dr Araujo on Monday at a symposium at Monash University, said his country signed the treaties under duress.

The first treaty was signed when East Timor, freshly liberated from Indonesian rule, was still under UN administration and ravaged by war. Australia, Mr Guterres said, "left East Timor with no option but to agree to it".

"The pressure from Australia was such that Foreign Minister Alexander Downer felt appropriate to remind the then Special Representative of the United Nations and Transitional Administrator of East Timor, the late Sergio Vieira de Mello, that 'Australia could bring meltdown to East Timor if it so chose'," he said.

"As you can draw from this mood, it was a situation where the United Nations and the Timorese leaders could not sustain their position under Australian pressure. Lawyers might call this out as unconscionable conduct."

A second treaty negotiated between 2004 and 2007 was unfair because Australia eavesdropped on the Timorese negotiating team after a team of Australian Secret Intelligence Service officers posing as aid workers inserted listening devices into the government offices in Dili.

The latter treaty gave East Timor 50 per cent of revenue from the undeveloped but massive Greater Sunrise oil and gas deposit.

Mr Turnbull used his [first major foreign policy address](#) in Washington to laud a "rules-based" global order, urge the United States and other nations to ratify UNCLOS and state "differences should be resolved by international law".

But Mr Guterres said Australia's credibility was undermined by a contradictory position when it came to East Timor.

"[Australia] does not conform to the behaviour of a country that wants to also exert its international rules

based leadership in our region and beyond," he said, noting Australia was seeking a seat on the UN Human Rights Commission.

Indonesia, unlike Australia, has not withdrawn from the jurisdiction of UNCLOS.

A spokesman for Mr Turnbull declined to comment other than to confirm the letter from Dr Araujo had been received and a response would be forthcoming.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/east-timor-to-malcolm-turnbull-lets-start-talks-on-maritime-boundary-20160215-gmugd1.html>