

East Timor's Xanana Gusmao says small nations angry with Australia, and will put bid for UN seat in peril

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EXCLUSIVE



Former East Timor president, Xanana Gusmao, in Sydney last week. *Photo: Nic Walker*

Australia's bid for a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council is under threat due to its refusal to negotiate directly with East Timor over the disputed maritime boundary, the former president of the fledgling state, Xanana Gusmao, says.

In an exclusive interview with Fairfax Media, Mr Gusmao - still a hugely influential figure in East Timor and its government - said his country would not actively support Australia's bid, adding that many developing nations were alarmed by Australia's stance on the border in Timor Sea, which it says is denying tens of billions of dollars in oil and gas revenue that should be rightfully East Timor's.



Xanana Gusmao at the ANZAC Day dawn service in Martin Place, Sydney, last year. *Photo: Louise Kennerley*

"We will be there at the UN saying we don't think it's the right time for Australia to be there on the Human Rights Council," Mr Gusmao said.

"How can Australia deny the rights of one people and one country - East Timor - if it wants to defend human rights. When we talk about human rights, we talk about it in a large context. The right to human life, the right to education, the right to health. It is everything.

"That's why it will be very difficult for Australia [to win a seat]. We know many countries - small, poor - who have also been bullied by their big neighbours."

East Timor's position illustrates the deteriorating relations between the neighbouring states. During the previous Labor administration, East Timor lobbied hard for Australia when it sought a position on the security council, using its influence among emerging and Portuguese-language nations to woo them to Australia's cause.

The rebuff from East Timor comes as Australia's human rights credentials come under international scrutiny over its approach to processing asylum seekers offshore, especially after the closure of Manus Island's detention centre last week and Australia's refusal to resettle any of the asylum seekers left in limbo.

"The whole refugee issue is damaging Australia's international reputation," says Elaine Pearson, of Human Rights Watch, a prominent non-government organisation.

Australia is putting in a huge effort to get on the human rights council, the UN body that monitors human rights in every country. Philip Ruddock - the veteran Liberal MP and former immigration minister - was appointed human rights envoy this year to guide the bid.

Mr Ruddock disputed the notion that disquiet among some nations about refugee policy and the boundary fracas with East Timor would cruel Australia's bid.

"There are a broad range of issues that are relevant before the human rights council," he said, adding Australia's bid will be built on its record of promoting the rights of women, the media press and Indigenous communities, as well as its opposition to the death penalty.

The council has 47 members. Many have poor human rights records, including Saudi Arabia, China and Qatar.

Australia is in the "western and others" grouping of nations. It is seen as being among three countries chasing two spots on the council from 2018 to 2020. France is considered a near certainty to win one slot while Australia and Spain battle for the final position.

East Timor has taken Australia to the UN for "compulsory conciliation" over the border, frustrated by Australia's refusal to negotiate directly. Australia has until Monday to nominate two members to work on the five-member panel that will take 12 months to investigate the dispute and provide non-binding recommendations.

Mr Gusmao said his country's difficulties with Australia contrast with the agreement between East Timor and Indonesia to negotiate a sea border on the basis of a "median line" principle.

Indonesia was a brutal occupier of East Timor for three decades and imprisoned Gusmao for years. Australia played a key role in its liberation.

Asked to reflect on this turn of events, Mr Gusmao said: "Yes, it is ironic, isn't it."



A former militant, Xanana Gusmao was the first President of East Timor, serving from May 2002 to May 2007. Photo: Nic Walker