

[[The Sydney Morning Herald](#)]

Nobel laureate calls on Australia to show 'fair go' over \$40b Timor Sea oil

Date: October 27 2016

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East Timor's former prime minister and president Dr Jose Ramos-Horta has appealed to Australia's sense of a "fair go", asking for a sea boundary to be changed to share \$40 billion in oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

Dr Ramos-Horta made the comments while in Brisbane for his keynote address to the two-day Age of Insecurities conference, organised by Griffith University to focus attention on human displacement, terrorism, refugee issues and problems facing emerging nations.

"Show your greatness, your traditional fairness and agree to the equi-distance," Dr Ramos-Horta said.

"And do not agree in a grudging way.

"Agree in an all-embracing way and offer yourselves to further develop this new area.

"When you are a big country like Australia you should also be humble and wise and embrace the weaker one.

"Because that would only make Australia greater."

However Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, speaking from Indonesia, said the existing boundaries had allowed East Timor to "build a \$16 billion petroleum fund".

Australia, East Timor and Indonesia have for more than a decade disputed the maritime boundary in the Timor Sea over land that contains an estimated \$40 billion in gas and oil reserves in the Greater Sunrise gas field that lies between the two countries.

Though East Timor received independence in 2002 and a Timor Sea Treaty signed, there was still no permanent sea border between Australia and East Timor.

Australia agreed to United Nations' compulsory conciliation in April 2016, a process which has a 12-month time frame for a recommendation to be made by the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

"They have accepted this UN mechanism which they would hope will be in their favour," Dr Ramos-Horta said in Brisbane.

"But they know it can go the other way around," he said.

"And having accepted the mechanism, I know they are prepared to accept the final outcome of the reconciliation."

East Timor is arguing for a boundary "equi-distant between the two countries".

"Australia is a vast continent and a million times richer than Timor-Leste (East Timor)," Dr Ramos-Horta said in Brisbane.

In his keynote speech, he said Australia as the larger country had "in the past" felt it should have "the greater share" of the Timor Sea.

"And that we should be reduced to a few metres offshore," he told conference delegates.

"From the logic of a big country, it seems to make sense.

"But Australia seemed shocked when we said we would not agree."

He said he was confident the conciliation debate would progress favourably but cited "some frictions" between the two countries.

Australian intelligence agents were accused by East Timor of bugging East Timor's cabinet rooms in 2004 as the debate began under a different 2006 treaty, the Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea.

Australia returned documents to East Timor in 2015, allegedly linked to the 2004 bugging.

A former Australia Secret Intelligence Service agent was denied a passport by the Australian government in February 2016 to travel to The Hague to give evidence about the alleged bugging.

More recent talks were positive, Dr Ramos-Horta said.

"We hope that with wisdom and with patience, Australia will again show its solidarity to Timor-Leste, as it did in 1999.

"And after more than 15 years of tremendous tactical, locational and financial support to Timor-Leste, that Australia will finally agree to a equi-distant line.

"And we can have a better arrangement to the Timor Sea."

Ms Bishop said treaty obligations had enabled resource development to proceed, which had been of great benefit to Timor-Leste, "enabling it to accumulate a petroleum fund worth more than \$16 billion".

"That is in excess of eight times its annual GDP."

Ms Bishop said the detailed discussions were confidential, but were proceeding in "good faith".

"Australia and Timor-Leste are engaging in good faith in a conciliation regarding maritime boundaries," she said.

"Australia and Timor-Leste do not agree on the method used to determine permanent boundaries."

Dr Ramos-Horta, originally as a spokesman for the Free East Timor movement, was awarded the Nobel prize in 1996 for his role in representing the people of East Timor for three decades as they struggled to win their independence from Indonesia.

He eventually served as East Timor's first foreign minister (2002-2007), then prime minister (2006), before being appointed president of East Timor from 2007-2012.

He now serves on a United Nation panel that reviews peace-keeping operations around the world.