

Church lends support for Timor-Leste over maritime dispute

Tiny nation locked in row with Australia over fixed sea border that's costing Dili billions in oil and gas cash



Members of the ASEAN People's Forum and Timorese people march to the Australian embassy in Dili on Aug. 5, calling on Canberra to open a dialogue with Timor-Leste over a sea border row (Photo by Thomas Ora)

Thomas Ora, Dili Timor Leste August 9, 2016

The Catholic Church has moved to support the people of Timor-Leste in their dispute with Australia over maritime boundaries involving billions of dollars in oil and gas reserves.

It demonstrated this support in a march on the Australian embassy in Dili at the close of the ASEAN People's Forum (APF) on Aug 5. The maritime dispute was discussed at the annual meeting.

Early this year, after Australia rejected a request to renegotiate maritime boundaries, the Timor-Leste government brought the dispute to the United Nations. The tiny nation argued that the lack of a fixed, mutually respected border with Australia has cost it billions of dollars in oil and gas revenues.

Timor Leste depends on oil to support its development, using it to fund infrastructure, education, health and other services.

Father Mario de Calvalho Soares, Director of Caritas in Baucau Diocese was a participant of the APF conference. He said that the church and the people appreciated the support of the forum.

“The church supports this plight, because it is for the greater benefit of Timor-Leste people,” Father Soares told ucanews.com.

“It is part of the church’s mission to serve the people, who are 97 percent Catholics,” he said. Timor-Leste has a population of 1.2 million living in 13 districts across the dioceses of Dili, Baucau and Maliana.

“People have sacrificed many resources for hundreds of years. They gained independence fourteen years ago and don’t want it to lose their resources again,” he added.

The church, he said, would support and work with any civil society groups, such as APF, to improve the people’s situation, from the remotest village to national level.

Fernando da Costa, a member of the steering committee member for the recent event, explained that, “Conference members agreed that Australia should dialogue with Timor-Leste, and [Australia should] stop taking from this poor country.” He said he is happy with APF’s decision to support Timor-Leste in the boundary dispute.

According to reports, Timor-Leste and Australia have formed a council to discuss the maritime boundary in light of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The five-member team including two Timorese, two Australians and a UN representative began its work in April and is expected to conclude its task in July 2017.

Former prime minister, Jose Ramos-Horta, recipient of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize, also commended the APF position.

Their decision, he said, reminded him of the support given to him during the 24 years of Indonesian occupation, from friends in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Europe, the United States, and Australia.

“On behalf of the people of Timor-Leste, I thank everyone for the solidarity from overseas friends,” he said.

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