

Timor-Leste protesters urge Australia to settle boundary dispute Canberra reaps profits through invalid treaty signed before Indonesian occupation

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About 3,000 people marched to the Australian embassy in the Timor-Leste capital of Dili on Feb. 23, demanding that the Australian government settle a maritime dispute.

The demonstrators walked 500 meters from the Australian-owned Tiger refueling station to the embassy carrying banners that read "We want justice, we want it now."

They said Australia has been exploiting oil and gas reserves in the Timor Gap — the maritime boundary separating the two countries — for 40 years, using a treaty it signed with Indonesia in 1972 as an impetus to support Indonesia's invasion of East Timor in 1975.

Juvinal Diaz, the coordinator of the Movement Against the Occupation of the Timor Sea, told protesters that the value of aid received from Australia since 1999, about US\$1.7 billion, is less than the US\$5 billion Australia earned in the last 10 years from oil and gas in the Timor Gap.

"The truth is that it is the right of Timor-Leste people. Through this mass demonstration we demand the Australian government to immediately dialog with Timor-Leste," said Diaz, a researcher at Lao Hamutuk, an independent monitoring group on the country's economy and development.

The movement published a declaration demanding that Australia resolve its maritime boundary dispute with Timor-Leste through the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

Diaz said the treaty signed with Indonesia is invalid under international law.

"When Timor-Leste gained independence through a referendum on Aug. 30, 1999, Australia still controlled the country's marine resources," he said.

Timor-Leste foreign minister Hernani Coelho revealed that Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araujo earlier had sent a letter to negotiate maritime boundaries, but the Australian government has not

responded.

"Australia has not responded, unlike Indonesia, which has been very cooperative in settling maritime boundary [issues] with Timor-Leste. With Indonesia, it is nearing completion," Coelho told reporters.

Marito Reis a former political prisoner and cabinet member, also voiced his concerns, saying "For 24 years Timor-Leste fought against the Indonesian military to have full independence and entitlement of land and marine resources. Unfortunately, it is still gripped by Australia."

Gregorio Saldanha, a social activist, said Australia was partly responsible for Timor Leste's poverty. He noted that 40,000 Timorese died fighting for Australia against Japanese troops during World War II.

"Timorese people have been impoverished since the era of Japanese, Portuguese and Indonesia colonization. At this time most people are still poor, and dependent on natural resources such as oil and gas," he said.