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LEGAL

East Timor's first president slams Australia over oil field

BY CALEB GORTON ON APRIL 27, 2016

East Timor's first president Xanana Gusmão has labelled Australia's maritime border dispute with Timor-Leste as "immoral" and claims it breaks international law.

Speaking at a public lecture at Curtin University in Perth, Mr Gusmão slammed the maritime treaty between the two countries.

Australia and East Timor have overlapping border claims in the Timor Sea, which includes an oil and gas field. Under the 2007 treaty, East Timor receives 90 per cent of oil revenue from the area and Australia receives 10 per cent.

"Our strong relationship is being overshadowed by one issue; Timor-Leste's right to our maritime borders," Mr Gusmão said.

Mr Gusmão said Australia maintained it was a generous deal but the oil should belong to Timor-Leste.

"Australia knows its position is not consistent with international law," he said.

"We say to the Australian government, 'it is time to right the wrong'."

There is currently no official maritime border between the countries, Mr Gusmão said.

"Australia refuses to talk to Timor-Leste about the remaining 1.8 per cent of its maritime boundary in the Timor Sea," he said.

"Australia remains a wall of silence."

East Timor Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araújo wrote to Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in February to urge Australia to open talks about the dispute.

More than 10,000 people protested outside the Australian embassy in Dili in March.

East Timor launched action to create a permanent sea border under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on April 11. The claim will be decided by an independent panel of experts.

"Establishing permanent maritime boundaries is a matter of national priority for Timor-Leste, as the final step in realising our sovereignty as an independent state," Mr Araújo said in a statement earlier this month.

“Australia is obliged to negotiate permanent maritime boundaries with Timor-Leste but it has refused to do so, despite all our invitations.

“This has left us with only one option.”

East Timor was occupied by Indonesian forces from 1975 until it declared independence in 1999. Violence broke out after the declaration and Australian-led UN forces entered East Timor in late 1999.

The original Timor Sea Treaty, signed in 2002, allowed Australia and East Timor to share resources in the Timor Sea. That treaty was signed on the day the country became independent of United Nations rule.

Mr Gusmão said the 2002 boundaries were made when East Timor was at its weakest.

“Australia took advantage of our vulnerability,” he said.

Mr Gusmão was a key figure in the independence movement and was the leader of the Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor in the 1980s.

He was later imprisoned by Indonesian forces from 1993 to 1999.

Mr Gusmão said Australia should not tell countries in the South China Sea to respect maritime borders while ignoring its own responsibilities in the Timor Sea.

“We have faith in the Australian people in their commitment to fairness and justice,” he said.