

JOSEPHINE SISTER SEEKS JUST OUTCOME ON TIMOR GAP

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Timor action: Josephite Sister Susan Connelly.

JOSEPHITE nun and human rights advocate Josephite Sister Susan Connelly has urged Australians to maintain pressure on the Federal Government to negotiate a fair maritime boundary with East Timor.

On January 9, Australia and East Timor agreed to begin negotiations on a permanent maritime boundary between the two countries – a significant shift which could potentially end years of dispute over the lucrative oil-rich Timor Gap and end bitter mistrust between neighbours.

Canberra and Dili have agreed to ditch the controversial Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMats) treaty that divides future revenue from the Greater Sunrise oil and gas reserve, where an estimated \$40 billion worth of oil and gas lies beneath the Timor Sea.

"The recent news that Australia has agreed to negotiate maritime boundaries with Timor-Leste is welcome, but there are many loose ends and unknowns," Sr Connelly, an outspoken advocate for East Timor's maritime boundary aspirations, said.

"Given the history, we cannot afford to be complacent."

Dispute over how to delineate the sea boundary has marred relations since East Timor won its independence in 2002, but reached a crisis point in 2012, when Australia was revealed to have spied on East Timor's cabinet by bugging its cabinet room under the pretext of renovations.



Divided territory: "2017 could see this issue finally move closer to a proper resolution, but it is certainly not a forgone conclusion and it is not a time to 'take our foot off the pedal'."

The two countries have been taking part in a year-long compulsory conciliation, overseen by the permanent court of arbitration (PCA) in The Hague, over the maritime boundary dispute.

Steps towards conciliation have not been made public but, in an unprecedented move, the foreign affairs ministers of Australia and East Timor, along with the PCA, this month announced key developments that could break the impasse.

Terminating the CMats treaty is a significant shift in position for Australia, which had maintained the treaty was valid and should remain in force.

The treaty will cease to exist three months from East Timor's formal notification. Both countries have agreed to then negotiate a permanent boundary.

"2017 could see this issue finally move closer to a proper resolution, but it is certainly not a forgone conclusion and it is not a time to 'take our foot off the pedal'," Sr Connelly wrote on her blog, Timfo.org.

"As I see it 2017 is a year to ramp up the pressure, visit our local Members of Parliament and make sure that Canberra knows that we support a prompt and proper resolution of this issue.

"Representatives of our Government are finally, reluctantly, talking about this issue in the forum provided by the UN Conciliation. They need to know we care and we are watching."