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Timor-Leste and Australia to sign a historic treaty on maritime boundaries Tuesday

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Lusa, 3 March 2018 -- UN Secretary-General António Guterres will witness on Tuesday in New York the signing of a historic treaty that will for the first time delimit the maritime borders between Timor-Leste and Australia, the most contentious line of bilateral relations.

The document, whose exact outlines are not yet known, puts the border line in the position defended by Timor-Leste, that is, equidistant from both countries, as Dili has always claimed.

A line that the Portuguese colonial administration, the Indonesian occupiers and the Timor-Leste leaders have always argued should be placed where it will now be and which formalizes the ownership of resources that up to now Timor-Leste has had to share with Canberra.

The historical significance of the moment closes a cycle with several decades of controversy, protests and intense negotiations to define a line whose lack of definition has cost Timor-Leste five billion dollars, according to estimates by the organization La'o Hamutuk.

It has tainted the relationship of successive Australian governments with the Timorese people in the worst way, and since the restoration of independence, it has negatively marked the relationship between the two states.

If Timor-Leste was, for more than two decades, the "stone in the shoe" of Indonesia, as described by former Indonesian minister Ali Alatas, the Timor Sea was an expensive pebble in the relationship with Australia.

'No Blood For Oil', one of the slogans that in the 90s of the last century marked part of the campaign of the external wing of the fight against Indonesian occupation in East Timor, became a symbol of what for many was one of the motivations for Australian recognition of the occupation and annexation of the territory by Indonesia.

"The Australian reaction to the Indonesian invasion of Portuguese Timor was influenced by its interest in the oil fields of Timor Gap. Australia had a multibillion-dollar interest in Indonesia occupying Portuguese Timor," argues Australian academic Kim McGrath in a book on the subject published last year.

For the academic, Timor-Leste's oil resources in the Timor Sea have been the "dominant driver" of Australia's "successive betrayals" of the Timorese since it unilaterally awarded the first exploration licenses in the area in 1963.

Agio Pereira - one of the men who then donned "No Blood for Oil" shirts, in several protests involving Timorese and Australian supporters in Australia - will sign the document on behalf of Timor-Leste.

Witnessing the ceremony will be António Guterres, now secretary general of the United Nations but former prime minister of Portugal, a country that in the sixties and seventies tried to close an identical treaty with Australia.

Also present will be Xanana Gusmão the "chief negotiator" and the man who led the strategy to first bring Australia to the table of a Conciliation Commission set up under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and then to close in record time an agreement that was said to be impossible.

However, there is still no agreement for the exploration of the Greater Sunrise fields, whose potential revenues will define Timor-Leste's medium-term future.

Nevertheless, it is part of the treaty either an agreement on the sharing of resources when this model of development is defined, or instruments - which will be created when the document is ratified - to help move those negotiations forward.

The definitive step in this agreement was made at the end of August last year in Copenhagen when the two delegations agreed on the "core elements" of the delimitation of maritime borders between the two countries and on the legal status for the development of the Greater Sunrise gas well - with estimated reserves of 5.1 trillion cubic feet of gas.

Since then it was necessary to finalize details and, above all, to try to solve the negotiation issue with the consortium that has the license for Greater Sunrise.

This is another sign of the true impact of what many people claim to have been the unfairness of the situation to this day: the future of a resource in Timor-Leste waters is still not exclusively dependent on Timorese decisions.

As in the wells explored so far, and regardless of which development model is agreed upon, Australia will also receive some revenues from Greater Sunrise.