

Timor bugging whistleblower faces Australia criminal charges

Published 17 hours ago on 28 June 2018



Timor Leste, which gained independence from Indonesian occupation in 2002, is impoverished and depends heavily on oil and gas exports.

SYDNEY, June 28 — Criminal charges have been filed against a spy-turned-whistleblower who exposed a secret Australian bugging operation in Timor Leste, parliament heard today, in what one MP called an “insane development”.

So-called “Witness K” was allegedly involved in a 2004 Australian plot to listen in on Dili’s cabinet rooms during negotiations over a contentious oil and gas treaty and maritime boundary.

He later became a key witness for Timor Leste in a case against Canberra over the claims, which have since been dropped.

Independent MP Andrew Wilkie — himself a former intelligence analyst — told parliament that federal prosecutors recently filed charges against the former operative and his lawyer Bernard Collaery.

“This is obviously an insane development in its own right, but an insane development made all the more curious by Australia’s recent commitment to a new treaty with Timor Leste,” he said.

“It seems that with the diplomacy out of the way, it’s time to bury the bodies.”

Wilkie, who called the operation to bug the cabinet rooms “illegal” and “unscrupulous”, did not specify the exact nature of the charges.

But Collaery told reporters they had been charged with conspiracy to breach section 39 of the Intelligence Services Act for allegedly sharing information they obtained during Witness K’s employment, according to Guardian Australia.

Witness K had taken his complaint to the inspector-general for Australia’s intelligence agencies and received approval to both disclose the alleged bugging and act for Timor in international proceedings, Collaery said.

Wilkie told parliament that the former spy, who has reportedly been denied a passport since 2012, and his lawyer were being made the fall guys for the espionage operation, which he said was “what happens in a pre-police state”.

A protracted row over Timor Leste and Australia’s maritime border — with billions of dollars in offshore gas revenue at stake — was finally resolved in March.

Timor Leste, which gained independence from Indonesian occupation in 2002, is impoverished and depends heavily on oil and gas exports.

In 2006, it signed a maritime treaty with Australia which covered the vast Greater Sunrise gas field between the two nations. The field has an estimated worth of between US\$40 billion to US\$50 billion (RM161.67 billion to RM 202.08 billion).

But Dili then accused Australia of spying to gain commercial advantage during the 2004 negotiations and demanded the treaty be ripped up.

It officially dropped its spying case before the UN’s highest International Court of Justice in June 2015 after Australia returned sensitive documents, ahead of the dispute’s resolution. — AFP