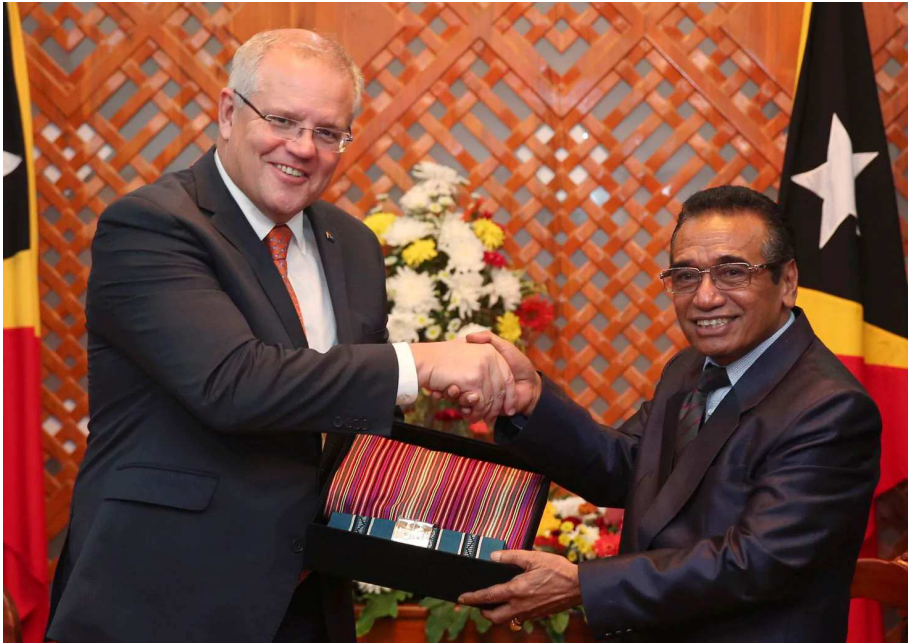


Australia to improve East Timorese internet and naval base

By Rod McGuirk | AP August 30 at 4:53 AM, in the Washington Post Business website



Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, left, receives souvenir of traditional Timorese woven cloths called 'tais' from East Timorese President Francisco Guterres during their meeting in Dili, East Timor, Friday, Aug. 30, 2019. Australia has committed to invest in East Timor's naval infrastructure and provide an undersea internet cable between the countries as China increases its influence in the region. (Kandhi Barnez/Associated Press)

CANBERRA, Australia — Australia on Friday announced a new maritime security agreement with East Timor in which the fledgling democracy will gain naval infrastructure and an undersea internet link with the world as China increases its influence in the region.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared a “new chapter in our relationship” when he met with his East Timorese counterpart, Taur Matan Ruak, in the East Timor capital of Dili on Friday to exchange diplomatic notes that activate a new Timor Sea seabed oil and gas revenue-sharing deal. The visit marks the 20th anniversary of a United Nations-sanctioned vote that led to the half-island nation becoming independent of Indonesia.

Morrison also used the occasion to announce a “new maritime security package” in which Australia will pay for a new wharf at the Hera Naval Base on East Timor's north coast that will help the country operate two Guardian Class patrol boats that will be given by Australia in 2023.

Australia will provide a training vessel in preparation for East Timor taking delivery of the patrol boats and pay for the concept design of a broader upgrade of the base, Morrison said.

Australia will also pay for the engineering and design work needed to link East Timor via a fiber-optic cable to an Australian cable system that runs between the northern cities of Darwin and Port Hedland.

Morrison said his government would work with East Timor “on financing and construction options.”

“Our relationship will endure, we respect your hard-won sovereignty and independence and will continue to walk with you,” Morrison said.

East Timor is one of a few countries without a fiber-optic internet connection and relies on slow and expensive satellite services.

Dividing the Timor Sea energy revenue riches, including the untapped Greater Sunrise field worth an estimated \$50 billion, has been a source of diplomatic conflict between the near-neighbors.

A former Australian spy and his lawyer are being prosecuted in Australia for disclosing in 2012 allegations that Australia bugged East Timor's Cabinet rooms in 2004 to gain an unfair advantage in Timor Sea treaty negotiations. A treaty signed in 2006 was scrapped and a replacement treaty that was more generous to East Timor was signed last year.

The prosecutions have prompted street protests in Dili by supporters of the Australian whistleblowers. Some in the crowd who met the Australian entourage wore T-shirts printed with a photograph of the charged lawyer, Bernard Collaery.

Australian Shirley Shackleton, 87, dodged security guards to deliver Foreign Minister Marise Payne, who was part of Morrison's entourage, a petition with 4,000 signatures calling for the charges to be dropped.

Shackleton is the widow of one of the five Australian television journalists who were killed while reporting on Indonesia's invasion of East Timor at the border town of Balibo in 1975. She has campaigned ever since for the killers to be brought to justice.

"I am not a lawyer, but I know what is right and wrong and this is wrong," Shackleton said of the Australian prosecutions.

Morrison would not be drawn in on the merits of the cases.

"This is a domestic matter in Australia, it's currently before the courts so it's not a matter I intend to offer comment on," Morrison told reporters.

Some East Timorese lawmakers want to accept Chinese investment to pipe Greater Sunrise oil and gas to East Timor for processing, prompting fears that the country could become overly indebted to China, like other economically vulnerable island nations in the region.

The East Timor internet cable promise follows a commitment by Australia to carry most of the costs of running similar cables from Sydney to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

The Papua New Guinea and Solomons cables were offered to prevent Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei from providing alternative networks. Australia has barred Huawei from its own national broadband network and unfolding 5G networks on security grounds.

Australia led the United Nations military force that brought peace to East Timor in the bloody aftermath of the 1999 independence ballot. The East Timorese invited the Australian military back in 2006 to restore order after a military mutiny.

Morrison's visit to East Timor is the first by an Australian prime minister in 12 years. Australia is stepping up its aid program in the Asia-Pacific region as a counter to deepening Chinese investment.