

World

Bombing of Darwin prelude to Timor invasion

Hamish McDonald, Asia-Pacific Editor

★Read later



East Timor's Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao bows his head as the Last Post is played during a visit to the ANZAC Memorial in Sydney yesterday. Photo: AP

As Australians recalled the Japanese bombing of Darwin 70 years ago yesterday, the leader of a small neighbouring country was reminding us gently that this was but a sideshow to the catastrophe that hit his people a day later.

On February 20 in 1942, the first waves of an invasion and occupation army of 20,000 Japanese soldiers stormed ashore in Dili, the capital of what was then Portuguese Timor. The Darwin attack was to block any Australian attempt to interfere.

But for an earlier violation of Portugal's neutrality by Australian commandos, the colony might have sat out the war untouched by fighting, like Lisbon's other East Asian colony Macau. As it was, the allied troops turned to guerilla warfare in Timor's hinterland and the Japanese crackdown resulted in the deaths of over 50,000 Timorese, about 13 per cent of the population.

In Sydney yesterday, the Prime Minister of East Timor, Xanana Gusmao, laid wreaths and expressed thanks for the support the Australian veterans of the Timor campaign had given the later independence struggle against Indonesian occupation, in which he himself had led the guerilla fight.

"It was a defining time in the relationship between the Timorese and Australians," Mr Gusmao said at the War Memorial, "but also a time in which nationality was transcended, and as human beings our people not only suffered deep pain, they also demonstrated acts of great altruism. It has resulted in bonds of friendship and honour that have left an enduring legacy."

Gusmao is also careful to credit Australia with its intervention in 1999 to stop the rampage by Indonesian forces and their militias after the independence referendum, its continued role as the largest aid donor, and the presence of an Australian led stabilisation force. But there are delicate subjects in which ruthless self-interest, rather than altruism, came to the fore on Australia's side.

One that still resounds is the maritime boundary, where Australia tried to push a discredited model of delineation on the emerging nation a decade ago, one that would have robbed it of most of its major natural resources asset, the \$11 billion Great Sunrise natural gas project in the Timor Sea. The then Howard government even withdrew Australia from the jurisdiction of international maritime courts to prevent East Timor appealing to the umpire.

A stiff campaign tipped the share of revenues greatly to Timor but the project operator, Woodside Petroleum, has so far resisted Timor's wish to have the gas processed on its territory, saying this would add \$5 billion in costs over its preferred option, a floating gas liquifaction plant above the field.

After bitter words with his predecessor, Mr Gusmao has found a more conciliatory new chief executive of Woodside, Peter Coleman, whom he met for the first time in Darwin on Friday. "It was a very good discussion," Mr Gusmao said. "I could see that they understand our perspective, why we want to bring the pipeline to our shore."

Getting the gas plant and its spin-off is critical to East Timor's hopes of creating jobs and investing in education for its fast growing population, now more than 1 million, with half under the age of 25, Mr Gusmao said. "This is our priority," he said.

As well as 70 years since the Japanese invasion, East Timor will celebrate other big anniversaries this year: 10 years since formal independence, 100 years since the last big rebellion against the Portuguese, 500 years since the Portuguese arrived. It will also be an election year, in which Mr Gusmao, 65, will stand again.

Talking about the past can revive old anger, he said. "We try to persuade ourselves to not forget, to never forget the good and the bad in the past, but to be able enough to forgive. That is why we have a very good relationship with Indonesia ... [But] when it is a date to remember our suffering, we have that."

"That is why even looking at some questions related to Australia, we cannot change the past," he added. "This is past, this is history. But I have to say Australia is now playing a very important role in our [development] process."

- with AA