

José Ramos-Horta calls on Timor-Leste to award Australia's Witness K top honour

Exclusive: Former president lauds convicted bugging whistleblower for exposing 'Australian government perfidy, bad faith and dishonesty in robbing world's poorest country'

By *Christopher Knaus* in *The Guardian*, 20 June 2021

José Ramos-Horta will formally request that [Timor-Leste](#) award Witness K the nation's highest honour, praising him for exposing "Australian government perfidy, bad faith and dishonesty" in a bugging operation conducted for the sole purpose of "robbing the poorest country in the world".

Witness K, a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service officer, was [convicted on Friday](#) and handed a three-month suspended jail term for his role in exposing a [spy operation](#) targeting Timor-Leste during negotiations to carve up oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

Ramos-Horta, a [Nobel peace prize winner](#), was Timor-Leste's president during the 2004 negotiations.

He told the Guardian that Witness K should be given the Medal of Honor of the Republic for his actions, which he said was the highest honour available to the former intelligence officer.

Ramos-Horta said he would take the matter up with the current president, Francisco Guterres.

"I will propose to the president to honour Witness K with the Medal of Honor of the Republic in recognition of his integrity and courage in exposing Australian government perfidy, bad faith and dishonesty in orchestrating an illegal bugging of our offices with the sole purpose of robbing the poorest country in the world," Ramos-Horta said.

The [2004 spy operation gave Australia the upper hand](#) during commercial negotiations critical to the future of newly independent Timor-Leste, a deeply impoverished nation that was allied with Australia.

Witness K's actions helped Timor-Leste bring a case against Australia in the permanent court of arbitration at The Hague, where it alleged Australia's spying meant it had not negotiated in good faith. The maritime treaty was [subsequently renegotiated](#) and Timor-Leste got a fairer deal.

Ramos-Horta's comments show the stark difference in the two nations' treatment of Witness K.

In Timor-Leste, he was praised as a hero.

In Australia, once the second treaty was finalised, the federal government signed off on his prosecution, alleging he conspired with his lawyer, Bernard Collaery, to disclose protected intelligence information.

In sentencing Witness K on Friday, magistrate Glenn Theakston said the former intelligence officer, now an elderly man, appeared to be motivated by justice.

He was not motivated by personal gain or blackmail, the court found, and had made the disclosures through two affidavits, which were intended to be filed at The Hague.

The court had earlier heard that former attorney general George Brandis delayed a decision on whether to sign off on the prosecution for years after 2013, when Witness K and Collaery's homes were raided and the former spy's passport was seized, preventing him from travelling to The Hague.

The decision was made soon after Christian Porter was appointed to succeed Brandis as attorney general.

Large parts of the case against Witness K were cloaked in secrecy, by virtue of the National Security Information Act.

The court heard only limited information about Witness K's identity and the allegations against him.

Witness K was said to have served with distinction in the navy and across multiple government agencies before his employment with Asis.

He was highly decorated and had suffered significant trauma from a vaguely described incident that was "large in scale" during his career.

He now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and hyper mania, the court heard.