

## José Ramos-Horta accuses Alexander Downer of ‘distorting’ issues around 2004 Timor-Leste bugging

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The president of Timor-Leste, José Ramos-Horta, has accused former foreign affairs minister [Alexander Downer](#) of “avoiding and distorting” the issues around the 2004 bugging scandal, saying recent comments ignored the fact that Australia had spied “on behalf of oil companies and using the cover of Australia’s supposedly altruistic foreign aid program”.

On Thursday, Downer appeared on the [ABC’s Q&A program](#) and was questioned about the 2004 Australian Secret Intelligence Service mission to bug Timor-Leste’s government during sensitive talks to carve up oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

Downer, who was foreign affairs minister at the time, took care not to comment directly on the operation, but said Australia’s intelligence practices were “no different from any of our other allied countries”.

“What our intelligence services do is collect intelligence,” he said. “That’s what they exist for. The suggestion that we somehow have intelligence services but they don’t collect intelligence is ... is absurd.”

The comments have frustrated [Timor-Leste](#), a partner in the Indo-Pacific, at a time when Australia is actively attempting to counteract Chinese government influence in the region.

Ramos-Horta told the Guardian that Downer was “obviously avoiding and distorting the core issue”.

The 2004 spy mission – later exposed with the help of intelligence officer Witness K and his lawyer, Bernard Collaery – was used to give Australia the upper hand in what were commercial negotiations about accessing oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea, which a collection of resource companies, led by the Australian company Woodside Petroleum, were seeking to exploit.

The fledgling and impoverished ally was hoping access to the Timor Sea reserves would lay the foundations for its development.

Ramos-Horta said running an intelligence operation in such circumstances differed significantly from spying on a hostile state.

“One thing is to spy, engage in bugging and other activities when facing unfriendly, hostile and sworn enemy powers like North Korea,” Ramos-Horta said. “Another is when the government of a supposedly benevolent, free and open society like Australia, engages in espionage activities on behalf of oil companies and using the cover of Australia’s supposedly altruistic foreign aid program.

“This is the fact.

“Let’s not forget, at the same time, Australian intelligence were bugging the private phone of the wife of the then president of Indonesia. Was that a legitimate protected intelligence gathering operation? Mr Downer is obviously avoiding and distorting the core issue.”

The case against Collaery – charged with unlawfully disclosing protected information about the operation – continues to be a running sore in the relationship with Timor-Leste.

Ramos-Horta, a Nobel Peace prize laureate who was elected president earlier this month, has [previously called for the prosecution](#) to be dropped and for Witness K and Collaery to be awarded Timor-Leste’s top honour.

In a recent interview [with the Nine newspapers](#), he said Timor-Leste had put “the past where it belongs”, but that:

“At the same time, I wish Australia would be more generous and more compassionate with Bernard Collaery. I would say please drop the case.”

China has named Timor-Leste as an important Belt and Road partner country and its state-owned companies have been involved in significant development projects in the developing nation.

Australia is also a major aid contributor to Timor-Leste, but Ramos-Horta has called for a more significant infrastructure partnership between the two countries, saying it is in Australia’s strategic interests.

Downer was approached for further comment.