Australia 'disappointed' as East Timor resumes fight in UN court

Australia expressed disappointment on Friday that East Timor will resume a legal battle in the UN's highest court over a controversial oil and gas treaty between the two countries, and vowed to "strongly defend" its case.

East Timor announced this week it would press ahead with its case against Australia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague, after a six-month hiatus for talks failed to settle a dispute over the boundaries for vast maritime energy fields shared in the Timor Sea.

The tiny, half-island nation, which has a sluggish economy heav-
ily dependent on oil and gas, wants the treaty signed in 2006
which determined the maritime boundaries torn up, as it claims
Australia spied on ministers to gain commercial advantage.

Australia allegedly used an aid project refurbishing East Timor's
cabinet offices as a front to plant listening devices to eavesdrop
on deliberations about the treaty in 2004.

Australia's Attorney-General George Brandis said Friday both
countries had agreed not to renegotiate the maritime boundaries
while the treaty was still in effect.

"Australia remains committed to that agreement and is disappoin-
ted that Timor-Leste is attempting to re-open it," he said Fri-
day, referring to East Timor's preferred name.

"The Australian Government be-
lieves differences
between our na-
tions are best re-
solved through
consultation."

The treaty splits
proceeds from lu-
crative Greater
Sunrise fields 50-50 between the neighbours, despite Australia
claiming the vast majority lie in its exclusive seabed.

East Timor wants the treaty nullified and the boundaries rede-
fin ed to place more of the oil and gas resources within its terri-
tory, a move Australia has vowed to strongly oppose at the ICJ.

East Timor agreed this week to drop a separate ICJ challenge
against Australia, in which it was demanding the return of sensi-
tive documents related to the long-running treaty dispute.

The documents were taken by Australia's intelligence services in
a 2013 raid on the office of a lawyer representing East Timor in
its spying case.

Australia returned the documents last month as an act of "good
faith, without acknowledgement that Australia had violated
Timor-Leste's sovereign rights," Brandis said.

The 2006 treaty was signed between Canberra and Dili, several
years after East Timor won independence following years of bru-
tal Indonesian occupation.