

## Australia 'broke its word' to East Timor



East Timor's Foreign Affairs minister Jose Luis Gutierrez speaks with Australian lawyer Bernard Collaery at the International Court of Justice last year. Source: AFP

**East Timor has broken a year-long silence over the sensational events surrounding Timor Sea negotiations, accusing Australia of failing to honour an undertaking to enter into constructive bilateral talks over a maritime boundary in the oil-rich region.**

In a statement to be released today, the East Timor government reveals Australia will return the documents seized in the December 2013 raid by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation on the office of its Canberra-based lawyer.

Although Australia appears reluctant to negotiate, The Australian understands the East Timor government will maintain its attempt to have a 2006 treaty declared invalid by the International Court of Justice.

East Timor has launched this action because it claims Australia engaged in espionage during the negotiations.

ASIO has also targeted a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service officer whom East Timor claims was involved in a bugging operation inside the office of its then prime minister Mari Alkatiri in 2004.

The agent had agreed to appear as a witness on behalf of the East Timor government before the raid took place.

East Timor said that last September, Tony Abbott and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop asked for a six-month adjournment to the ICJ hearings so the two countries could seek an amicable settlement.

East Timor says it agreed to the request “with the proviso” the two countries agree to structured talks on permanent maritime boundaries in the Timor Sea. “The adjournment period expired on 3 March, 2015. A schedule for bilateral talks on maritime boundaries between the two countries remains undefined,” the government says in the statement to be released today.

Instead of having a maritime boundary, the two countries signed the Timor Sea Treaty in 2002, following by the Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS) Treaty in 2006. This latter treaty divides the revenue equally from the proposed Greater Sunrise gas field development.

East Timor argues it is entitled to a much bigger share of this field given that it lies 150km off its coast, and 450km from Australia. A median-line boundary may deliver this entire field to East Timor.

Greater Sunrise holds an estimated five trillion cubic feet of gas and 225 million barrels of light oil, known as condensate. The field is a significant resource, equivalent to more than four years of Australia’s gas consumption and six months’ oil consumption.

East Timor’s Minister of State, Agio Pereira, said he welcomed Australia’s willingness to return the documents but there had been little progress towards a schedule of structured negotiations on securing permanent maritime boundaries in the Timor Sea.

East Timor has been reliant on one major oil and gas field since 2004, but production is declining rapidly.

“Timor-Leste hopes to see Australia put action to its declared principles, and remains optimistic that the leaders of our great neighbour will demonstrate courage and commit to a clear course of negotiations to settle the maritime boundaries between our two countries once and for all,” said Mr Pereira, who is close aide to the outgoing Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao.

The East Timor government said that after 16 months of defending its right to seize and keep the documents, Australia has now written to the ICJ stating it wishes to return them.

The court authorised the return of the documents on April 22, but the transfer is yet to take place.

Last night, Ms Bishop denied an agreement to engage in bilateral talks on maritime boundaries had been part of the deal last year to adjourn the ICJ matter.

She said the order to return the materials had been issued by the ICJ “on Australia’s request” and this was made in an effort to settle the case amicably, and as a signal of Australia’s goodwill towards East Timor.