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LETTERS
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Desire to settle permanent maritime boundaries

In Foreign Minister Bishop's letter to the editor (October 17-23) she expresses "concern" that readers will be "left with the impression that Australia's Timor Sea policies are inconsistent with international law and unfair to Timor-Leste", declaring emphatically that "This is not the case." This is precisely the case. Minister Bishop is treading down the path of her predecessors continually frustrating Timor-Leste's rights to have its maritime boundaries permanently settled. We are a patient people, but our patience is sorely tested. Australia has steadfastly foreclosed all avenues towards resolution of this issue, including negotiation and dispute resolution. At the same time, it has locked up an unfair share of the resources of the Timor Sea through the "provisional arrangements" Minister Bishop references. These "provisional arrangements" purport to restrict Timor-Leste for "up to 50 years". This is beyond any reasonable estimate of the life of the seabed resources in the disputed areas. Timor-Leste entered into these arrangements believing that Australia, as a good international citizen, would later negotiate to settle permanent maritime boundaries. Not only has it refused to do so, but it has also prevented other resolution of the matter by withdrawing, on the eve of Timor-Leste's May 2002 restoration of independence, from relevant international processes on matters relating to settlement of maritime boundaries. In short, Australia knows its position on its maritime boundary claims in the Timor Sea is inconsistent with international law, and has sought to preserve the pre-Timor-Leste independence status quo – one based on an illegal annexation. Australia's conduct is inconsistent with international law and with its public position on other maritime boundary disputes, where it admonishes all to act according to international law and the Convention on the Law of the Sea. Timor-Leste remains willing to negotiate in good faith, but it cannot do so alone. We ask Australia, through its new prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, as a good neighbour and a leading power in the international community that is seeking seats on the Human Rights Council and the Security Council, to honour its obligations by negotiating permanent maritime boundaries with Timor-Leste.

– *Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, Minister for Planning and Strategic Investment, Timor-Leste*