

Federal Labor reaffirms promise to mend relations with East Timor

Tuesday, March 22 (AAP)



Thousands of East Timorese are rallying outside Australia's embassy in Dili over maritime boundaries (AAP)



Image of East Timorese rallying outside Australia's embassy in Dili on Tuesday, March 22 (AAP)

Federal Labor's deputy leader Tanya Plibersek has made an election promise to mend relations with East Timor, on a day where thousands protested outside Australia's embassy in Dili over calls for a fairer deal on maritime boundaries.

By Peter Theodosiou

Source: AAP, SBS News 22 Mar 2016 -

For the second consecutive month, more than 10,000 East Timorese protested outside Australia's embassy in Dili, calling for a fairer deal on maritime boundaries and a carve-up of oil and gas reserves.

East Timor claims that it has lost around \$6.6 billion (US\$5 billion) in royalties and tax revenue in the Timor Sea since independence in 1999, and it has asserted that more than \$52 billion would lie in its territory if sea borders reflected the norms of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea.

The Federal Government has been accused of [ignoring the dispute](#) by East Timor officials.

East Timor Prime Minister Rui Maria Araujo said he wrote to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull seeking new negotiations in early 2016, but he said Mr Turnbull [replied that he was open to general talks](#) on bilateral issues and trade, but not on the border issue.

The Labor Party affirmed that it would [reopen talks with East Timor in February](#), but Ms Plibersek made it clear today that talks would be part of the agenda if her party wins this year's election.

Plibersek, who is Australia's Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, told SBS the maritime boundary dispute has poisoned relations between the two countries.

"Labor wants to end more than 40 years of uncertainty over the maritime border, and make sure that the wealth of the Timor Sea can be developed and benefit future generations," she said.

"Labor in government will finally resolve the border with Timor-Leste - through talks, or through arbitration or adjudication.

"As a good international citizen Australia cannot hold itself above international law.

Ms Plibersek said she met East Timor's former prime minister Xanana Gusmao in March 2015, and he "did not ask for charity for Timor-Leste - he asked for justice."

"That is what Labor's proposal is about," Ms Plibersek said.

Mr Gusmao made a speech earlier this week, calling for Timorese to "stand firm and raise one voice" to demand that Australia comes to the table to negotiate new sea boundaries.

An organiser of today's protests, Tomas Freitas said: "This is a struggle increasingly seen by Timorese people as necessary to complete our independence from foreign domination."

