

Thousands of East Timorese besiege Australian embassy in Dili

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The Australian embassy in Dili was besieged by Timorese demanding a permanent sea boundary in the oil and gas rich Timor Sea.



At least 10,000 people gathered outside the Australian embassy in Dili, the capital of East Timor, on Tuesday to protest against Australia's stance on the oil and gas meridian line in the Timor Sea. *Photo: Wayne Lovell, Timor Photography*

East Timor to Malcolm Turnbull: Let's start talks on maritime boundary
Labor offers new maritime boundary deal for East Timor

Bangkok: More than 10,000 Timorese besieged the Australian embassy in Dili on Tuesday to protest Australia's refusal to negotiate with East Timor on a permanent sea boundary in the oil- and gas-rich Timor Sea.

East Timor's former president and prime minister, Xanana Gusmao, called on Timorese to rope in 10 other people to attend the protest, one of the largest in the waterfront capital since the country voted to break away from Indonesia in 1999.



Protesters in Dili demand that Australia negotiate over the Timor Sea boundary. *Photo: Wayne Lovell, Timor Photography*

In a speech on the eve of the protest Mr Xanana, a hero of East Timor's independence revolution, said Timorese must "stand firm and raise one voice" to demand that Canberra negotiates with East Timor.

East Timor claims it has lost some US\$5 billion (nearly \$6.6 billion) in royalties and tax revenue in the Timor Sea since independence, enough to fund its entire budget for three years.

The fledgling half-island nation asserts the vast majority of oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea – worth about US\$40 billion in royalties and tax alone – would lie in its territory if sea borders reflected the norms of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea, a contention Australia rejects.



Protesters outside the gates of the Australian embassy in Dili. *Photo: Wayne Lovell, Timor Photography*

Organisers of the protest included student leaders and veterans of East Timor's long struggle for independence.

Many former East Timorese activists from Australia have also been involved in planned protests this week in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Jakarta, Manila and Kuala Lumpur to mark the anniversary of the date Australia withdrew its recognition of the maritime boundary jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice.

Protesters shouting "hands off Timor oil" and "negotiations now" demanded the case be brought back to the court as Timorese security forces guarded the embassy.



The maritime boundary has long been a contentious issue in East Timor. *Photo: Wayne Lovell / Timor Photography*

"As a big and powerful country in the region, Australia shouldn't be using its power to continually steal our future from the Timor Sea," said Juvinal Dias, a protest organiser from the Movement Against the Occupation of the Timor Sea.

"Australia should come to the table with good faith to negotiate with Timor-Leste [East Timor]".

Protest supporters recalled the sacrifices East Timorese made to help Australia during World War II. "Think about it Australia. Over 40,000 East Timorese died in WWII to help fight the Japanese navy ... the East Timorese want nothing more than what's fair," Alex Tilman, an official in the office of East Timor's prime minister, wrote on his Facebook page.



Thousands joined the protests outside the Australian embassy. *Photo: Wayne Lovell, Timor Photography*

Australia's Ambassador in Dili, Peter Doyle, said of the protest: "Australia believes in the right to peaceful protest and is confident that the Government of Timor-Leste will ensure the safety and security of the embassy, its staff and any visitors".

A complex series of revenue-sharing agreements have allowed some oil and gas developments in the Timor Sea to proceed even though Australia has no settled maritime boundary with East Timor.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull last month offered to hold "frank and open" discussions with East Timor about the boundary but stopped short of Dili's request for formal and discrete talks to settle the impasse.

Mr Turnbull said Australia's long held position was to support treaty arrangements that underpin the current resource sharing in the area and were negotiated in "good faith" and "consistent with international law".

Opposition foreign affairs spokesperson Tanya Plibersek announced this year that a Labor government would negotiate a new boundary in "good faith" and submit the dispute to international adjudication if bilateral talks failed to produce a result.

Labor's shift ended a bipartisan consensus on the maritime border issue, a major irritant in Australia's relations with East Timor.