



Timor-Leste's lawyer warns gas treaty deadline may be wishful thinking

By political reporter Tom Iggulden, staff

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After almost 20 years, could the battle of lucrative gas fields in the Timor Sea be over?

Australia and Timor-Leste — also known as East Timor — have been given until March to finalise a draft treaty signed earlier this year.

But legal adviser to Timor-Leste Bernard Collaery has said that could be wishful thinking and that any treaty would need to be signed off by the nation's parliament.

Prime Minister Mari Alkatari's minority Government could be forced to fight an election early next year after increasing calls for parliament to be dissolved.

"That's hardly the environment in which a treaty may have an easy passage through the local parliament in Dili," Mr Collaery said.

A spokesman for Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said final negotiations were confidential.

Timor-Leste initiated the compulsory conciliation process in 2016 in a bid to force Australia to negotiate a permanent maritime boundary.

In January, 2017, Timor-Leste terminated its 2006 treaty with Australia, which split revenue from the Greater Sunrise field 50/50 and delayed negotiations over a permanent maritime boundary for 50 years.

The country claimed the treaty was invalid because of allegations that Australia spied on cabinet ministers during negotiations to divide the oil and gas fields.

The two sides agreed on a draft treaty in September this year on maritime boundaries cutting through the \$50 billion Greater Sunrise gas fields.

Former Timor-Leste president Xanana Gusmao said at the time the "long and at times difficult" process had helped the country achieve its dream of "full sovereignty and to finally settle our maritime boundaries with Australia".

Mr Collaery said with China's influence on the rise in the Asia Pacific, it was in Australia's interest to be generous.

"We've got a strong defence and national security interest in Timor being happy with the outcome," he said.

Topics: business-economics-and-finance, oil-and-gas, world-politics, east-timor, australia

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