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Australia's agreement with Timor Leste does not have a positive history

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The announcement by the Permanent Court of Arbitration last week that Australia and Timor Leste have reached an agreement on maritime boundaries will hopefully bring to an end a shameful episode in Australia's foreign affairs history.

The dispute undermined Australia's claim to be an upstanding member of the international community.

As long as it continued Australia could not take the high ground and lecture other countries about bullying and exploitation of weaker neighbours.

Most Australians are rightly proud of the role Australia played in leading the multi-national peacekeeping force that restored order in East Timor in 1999 after Indonesian sponsored militia ran amok and threatened to destroy the newly established state before it had even begun.

But there's little to be proud of in the wheeling and dealing employed by Australian ministers and foreign affairs officials in earlier years when they manouevred to set a maritime boundary between the two countries that would materially benefit Australia.

The history since the mid-seventies is well documented by researcher Kim McGrath in her recently published book *Crossing the Line: Australia's Secret History in the Timor Sea*.

As early as the 1960s the Minister for National Development, David Fairbairn declared that the boundary between Australia and the countries to our north should extend no further than the median line, regardless of the potential oil riches.

But the Department of Foreign Affairs opposed negotiations with Portugal which administered its colony of East Timor, arguing that the colony would eventually fall under Indonesian sovereignty.

The department maintained this policy for decades.

McGrath reveals an August 1975 cable from Australia's ambassador to Indonesia Richard Woolcott to his department head saying that Australia should not do anything that could be construed as criticism of the Indonesian plan to incorporate Portuguese Timor.

Not least amongst Australia's concerns were oil and gas field interests.

Woolcott asks if the views of the Minister or Department of Minerals and Energy have been ascertained and points out that agreement on the sea border could be more readily negotiated with Indonesia, rather than Portugal or an independent Timor.

"I am recommending a pragmatic rather than a principled stand but this is what national interest and foreign

policy is all about," the man who would go on to head the Department of Foreign Affairs says.

McGrath quotes a number of sources saying that the Australian embassy in Jakarta was warned in advance that Indonesia would commence its East Timor destabilisation campaign on October 15, 1975.

But she also reveals that on October 14 Woolcott had dinner in Jakarta with the architect of the campaign, General Benny Murdani.

The Australian government was in turmoil in late 1975.

Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam -- who agreed with the foreign affairs department's position that East Timor would be incorporated into Indonesian territory -- was deposed on November 11.

With the Liberal-Country party coalition in government Woolcott cabled the department to remind new Liberal Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock that the Indonesians believed Peacock favoured the early integration of Portuguese Timor into Indonesia.

Indonesia launched its full scale invasion on December 7, 1975.

The following week Woolcott told journalists that if Australia had helped form an independent East Timor it could have become a constant source of reproach to Canberra and "it would probably have held out for a less generous seabed agreement than Indonesia had given off West Timor".

McGrath says the Department of Foreign Affairs believed the Indonesian military engagement in East Timor would be over quickly and the Timorese would welcome being part of Indonesia.

In the event the conflict raged for 25 years and cost at least 102,800 lives.

As the conflict raged former diplomat James Dunn documented the atrocities and his reports were published in Australian newspapers and sent to politicians and his former colleagues in Foreign Affairs.

On a copy of one of Dunn's papers on the atrocities an Australian embassy official wrote: "Everything is relative my dear chaps!"

This is not the only disgusting file note annotation.

The Fretilin independence fighters issued a press release stating that Indonesians were daily torturing, raping and executing the captured population.

Next to this is written, "sounds like fun" and "This report is internally inconsistent. If the enemy was impotent, as stated, how come they are daily raping the captured population? Or is the former a result of the later?"

The recipient of this comment, another Australian diplomat added, "sounds like the population must be in raptures."

McGrath reveals another notation to a Dunn report that there had been a great deal of looting and raping of girls.

Someone wrote, "How do you loot a girl? (misspelling?)"

Resistance leader Xanana Gusmao - who was later to be elected president of an independent Timor Leste and lead the Timor delegation that has just negotiated the new maritime boundaries - reported in 1978 that 140,000 Timorese were surrounded and subject to Indonesian napalm and scatter-bomb attacks.

At the same time the Australian government was happily negotiating the seabed boundary with Indonesia.

The election of a Labor government in 1983 did not alter the policy of putting Australia's material interests first and foremost.

And in 1989 it all paid off.

Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, with Richard Woolcott as his department head, signed the Timor Gap Treaty with Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas.

Indonesia conceded nearly 80 per cent of the Greater Sunrise gas field and gave Australia rights to another soon-to-be discovered oil and gas field.

Into his retirement Woolcott argued against independence for East Timor saying in 1999 that there could be substantial financial implications if the Timor Gap Treaty unravelled.

The newly independent state of Timor Leste was in no position to negotiate maritime boundaries on an equal footing with a powerful neighbour that had just played a positive part in enabling its creation.

Grossly unfair maritime boundaries were negotiated, effectively stealing oil and gas revenue from the impoverished state.

The details of the new Permanent Court of Arbitration agreement will be revealed next month.

It's to be hoped that Australian negotiators have at long last done the right and honourable thing.

This story was found at: ***<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/australias-agreement-with-timor-leste-does-not-have-a-positive-history-20170908-gydn6v.html>***