

Apologise

On August 30, the people of East Timor (Timor-Leste) celebrated 20 years of independence: in 1999 an overwhelming yes vote, ended 24 brutal years of occupation by Indonesia.

There were parades and traditional dances in the capital Dili but there has been no justice for the families of those killed in a wave of bloodshed unleashed – with the support of the Australian government – by the Indonesian army in 1999.

The East Timorese have been treated appallingly by Australian governments for a long time. TimorLeste needs all of the resources that rightly belong to them especially after they suffered 24 years of illegal and brutal occupation by the fascist dictatorship of General Suharto that resulted in a decline in a third of the population, 80 percent of its infrastructure destroyed and a large proportion of the population traumatised and experiencing high levels of unemployment, high child mortality, malnutrition. It is the poorest nation in SE Asia.

Consecutive Liberal and Labor Australian governments supported the takeover by the Indonesian military (TNI) in 1975 by officially recognising it, by arming and training the TNI (while knowing full well that it was committing genocide and gross human rights abuses) and by being an apologist for Indonesia when TNI crimes were exposed.

Now the Australian government should apologise to Timor-Leste for Australia's past shameful conduct, drop the charges against Witness K and Bernard Collaery and pay back all the proceeds it has taken from the oil and gas in Timor's half of the Timor Sea which is evidently worth billions of dollars.

The treaty on "Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea" (CMATS) was signed in 2006 between the then Howard government and the government of East Timor. The negotiations had been tense over the years. Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and the ruling Fretilin party were opposed to the maritime boundary between the two countries not being drawn half-way between them but closer to Timor-Leste along the seabed limits of the continental shelf. The theft had been agreed between the Hawke Labor government and Indonesia's Suharto dictatorship with a treaty in 1989 and the boundary was a major factor in Australia's hypocritical, indulgent stance towards Indonesia's invasion of East Timor in 1975.

In 2004, the Howard government Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer promised to give Alkatiri a "lesson in politics" for his pursuit of his struggling country's interests. It would get royalties from a Joint Petroleum Development Area and that's it. Alkatiri would soon be removed from office in coup-like circumstances. The Howard government refused international arbitration on the maritime boundary. The Australian public knew about the humiliation of Timor-Leste's representatives in 2004 but it would not have been aware that Australian spies had bugged government offices in Timor-Leste so that Howard's negotiators would have the drop on their local counterparts.

Some years later, a veteran spy told Canberra lawyer Bernard Collaery about the shameful operation he had been involved in. Collaery was acting for the government of Timor-Leste at the International Court of justice in The Hague. The Timorese wanted the treaty scrapped and a new one drawn up.

But rather than move to repair damaged relations, the government of Tony Abbott turned on Collaery and "Witness K" – a former ASIS agent – and the government of Timor-Leste. ASIO raided the lawyer's Canberra office and seized large numbers of files. Witness K has had his passport confiscated to prevent him giving evidence on the matter at The Hague.

The then Attorney-General George Brandis insisted the heavy-handed actions were in the oft-cited "national interest". But they are ultimately in the interest of oil and gas companies (such as generous Liberal Party donor Woodside Petroleum).

"Woodside is a huge Australian company and they were proposing to invest billions of dollars in Greater Sunrise [oil and gas field] to create wealth, which would inter alia have been wealth for Australians, but obviously substantially for the East Timorese as well. So I was all in favour of that. I was all in favour of it," Alexander Downer told the ABC's *Four Corners* program.

At issue was the maritime border dispute are royalties estimated at between \$10 billion and \$20 billion over the next 30 years.