

For East Timor, maritime boundary is not about oil. It's about pride.

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East Timorese President Taur Matan Ruak

East Timor's cancellation of the 2006 Treaty between Australia and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS), which centres on the oil between Australia and Timor, is not about money. It is not about the median line. It is not about whether Australia bullied the small country into making the agreement. It is about pride.

I spent a lot of time in that country in quite, let us say, straitened circumstances in the mid to late '90s. When a man has no food, no income, cannot provide for his family or protect them from marauding Indonesian forces or militia paid by them, things become pretty basic. When you can't stop your wife being raped or your kids being recruited into the militia out of hunger, you only have one thing left. That is your pride and self-respect. I watched Timorese men grapple with that. They fought, sometimes hopelessly, against the overwhelming military and logistical force they were faced with. They often died, were tortured and locked up and beaten for a few days, a few weeks, maybe months. The international community largely looked away, and throughout the '90s the deaths continued on a pretty much daily basis.

They were getting hammered, but they still fought. Eventually, and almost miraculously, the international community started to take notice. As a reporter, I finally started getting published covering the butcher's bill of the constant killing. No longer were my attempts to report the latest killings of pro-independence supporters met with the dismissive reply by editors "so what are your plucky brown fellows up to today?".

[Our land is girt by oil-rich sea ... that we steal from East Timor]

What happened next was the ultimate exercise in cynicism. The UN announced they would conduct a ballot over whether the Timorese wanted independence or to stay with Indonesia. Of course before they arrived the Indonesians took advantage of the situation by killing more Timorese. The massacres were supposedly carried out by "militia". Everyone could see that the Indonesian military was facilitating this. They provided trucks to drive the militia there, weapons, even food for those who carried out the massacres. It was no secret. It was a joke.

The massacres stopped for a while when the UN came in in mid 1999. But they started again as it became clear the Timorese would vote for independence. As the time for the ballot approached the Australian government under John Howard said everything would be fine. The Australian Federal Police contingent were unarmed and constantly attacked, as were the UN, also unarmed. Alexander Downer, in Dili, said everything would be fine because "Australians were a tough people". He didn't count on what happened next.

After the ballot and the result for independence was announced, the Indonesians went crazy. They shot at everybody, killed quite a few, started burning down the centre of Dili. Quite helpfully they had trucks on hand and evacuation flights scheduled for all the foreign media and UN workers willing to leave. Then they started to round up the locals and send them to Indonesia as refugees.

A few foreigners stayed, got shot at, rounded up like dogs. After a few days holed up in the UN compound most of us evacuated. Meanwhile, the Timorese got killed. There were bodies on the streets when we finally got back on September 20, 1999, protected by the Australian troops who finally, finally had been forced to do something and send in the peacekeeping force the UN, the Timorese and journalists had been calling for for months.

[Oil slick: East Timor wins battle, but Australia could yet win resources war]

The Timorese leadership came back. Order was restored. It took months for anything like normal life to resume. There was no water, no food, no roofs on the buildings. No jobs, no infrastructure.

I went up to the mountain camp in Waimori where the East Timorese guerrilla fighters had voluntarily confined themselves to avoid conflict with the retreating Indonesian forces. They were there with many civilians who had fled there to avoid the forced deportations. There wasn't much food. Dinner was rice and some sort of meat. My friend, a Canadian journalist, ate the meat and later got really sick. I just ate the rice; I later learned the meat was monkey. I interviewed the leader, Taur Matan Ruak. He is now the President of East Timor. And he told me then that they would get what they were owed in the Timor Gap. They would get what they deserved.

By cancelling the CMATS treaty they are another step closer to doing that. If anyone deserves their oil and gas it is these guys, for the sheer awfulness of what they have endured to free their country. Australia has been cynical and opportunistic in trying to negotiate a more favourable deal for itself in the post-independence period, but take it from someone who knows these people: don't mess with them. They'll get what is rightfully theirs or they will die trying. I know. I have seen it and lived it. It is not about the money. It is about the pride. And when you have nothing else that is all important. Australia's negotiators don't understand that.