

Xanana Gusmão: Ratification of Australia's border treaty “must be done”

LUSA -- July 23, 2019

Historical resistance leader Xanana Gusmão said today that ratification of the maritime boundary treaty with Australia is his "last duty", on behalf of "the heroes who died" in the struggle for East Timor's independence.

“Not my legacy. It is my last duty fulfilled. It was also part of the fight I was in. Where I saw people die under my eyes. This is just the continuation of the fight,” said Xanana Gusmão. in statements to Lusa in Dili.

“It's over, it's over. I am more free politically, morally, to tell the heroes I have won. The heroes are the ones who died and it is these heroes that I still owe,” he said.

The historic resistance leader was speaking to Lusa on the sidelines of ratification today in the Timorese National Parliament of the treaty that delimits the permanent maritime boundaries between Timor-Leste and Australia, a document he himself negotiated.

Asked about the significance of today, Xanana Gusmão insisted on recalling the memory of the many who fought to defend Timor-Leste's independence, won in the referendum of August 30, 1999.

“This feeling goes with me and can never be separated from me. I saw children, women, men, young people dying before me. This is what moves me. This gives me courage and sustains my determination to do so,” he said.

A determination, he explained, was born of the anger that grew in itself when it saw Australia negotiating with Indonesia about the resources of the Timor Sea, while in Timor-Leste people continued to die.

“This treaty is very important. I have followed Australian Government policy since the bush. I had a radio device that followed the world. And I followed the negotiations of Australia and Indonesia on the Timor Gap Treaty. And I always denounced this,” he recalled.

“Even worse when I heard that and then here, people would pass by and say to me: one more died, someone else died there. It infuriated me and the anger turned to determination to turn it around. And that's why it never left my mind to achieve that,” he said.

The first opportunity for serious action came when he took over as prime minister in 2007, allowing him to begin preparing a “long process” that would culminate in the signing in 2018 of a permanent treaty of borders with Australia.

The aim is that the treaty, which is expected to be ratified by the Australian parliament in the coming weeks, will formally enter into force on 30 August.

For this, it is also necessary that the President of the Republic promulgate a set of legislative amendments and the ratification resolution, approved today in parliament, where the Revolutionary Front of Independent Timor-Leste (Fretilin) voted against.

Speaking of the final vote, Xanana Gusmão was still hopeful that opposition MPs could cast their vote in favor of the treaty resolution, even after they voted against the legislative amendments.

“Making use of democracy is everyone's right and we cannot deny it. But in other parliaments, when the time is right, people usually react with common sense,” he said.

Fretilin eventually voted against.