



Timor-Leste will not give up in dispute over oil, maritime boundary: former leader Xanana Gusmao

666 ABC Canberra

Updated Tue 17 Mar 2015, 1:13pm

Timor-Leste's former leader Xanana Gusmao has again warned Australia that his fledgling nation will not back away from a dispute between the two countries over lucrative oil reserves below the Timor Sea.

Australia and Timor-Leste are currently locked in a standoff over the maritime boundary between the two countries, which determines who is entitled to what share of that resource.

In 2013 East Timor launched a case in The Hague alleging the Australia Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) covertly recorded Timorese ministers and officials during oil and gas negotiations in Dili in 2004, allegedly giving Australia the upper hand.

Late last year Australia and Timor-Leste agreed to suspend the International Court of Justice hearing into their bitter spy row in an effort to resolve their differences amicably.

But during an interview with 666 ABC Radio's Genevieve Jacobs in Canberra, Mr Gusmao reiterated his nation's determination to ensure its sovereignty is not compromised by the maritime boundary issue.

"I participated in the struggle for independence for 24 years. When we got independence after the referendum in 1999, becoming president in 2002, I told the people that independence is not a flag," he said.

"Independence is not having a state, presidents, parliaments, governments. Independence is to be the owner of our sovereignty. And sovereignty is the capacity to decide what belongs to us, what is ours."

'Australia is a country of principles'

Asked how Timor-Leste would deal with the Australian Government's clear diplomatic warnings about pursuing the matter further in the international arena, Mr Gusmao said Timor-Leste admired Australia, and believed that Australia was greater than this.

"That Australia is a country of principles. Not playing with principles," he said.

"We will continue to fight in the international area. We have a cause, and we have a case in the International Court of Justice ... in this, I can tell you we will not give up."

Mr Gusmao said building the oil sector was key to Timor-Leste's plans for future growth to ensure jobs and prosperous future for its people.

"The three main sectors that we will try to improve and motivate will be the oil sector, the horticultural and the tourism," he said.

A former resistance fighter, Ms Gusmao was prime minister of his country for seven until February, when he stepped down to facilitate a generational leadership transition.

He was his country's first president in 2002 after a 24-year struggle against Indonesian occupation.

Mr Gusmao was in Canberra on Monday to deliver the ST Lee Lecture on Asia and the Pacific at The Australian National University.

Topics: oil-and-gas, foreign-affairs, international-law, canberra-2600, act, australia, east-timor

First posted Tue 17 Mar 2015, 11:20am