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Timor-Leste

End Australia's "shameful policy"

The Information Officer of the Australia East Timor Association SA, Andrew Alcock, issued the following statement today following yesterday's statement by Tanya Plibersek at the National Press Club about the maritime border between Australia and Timor-Leste:

Along with the Timor Sea Justice Campaign and all Australians who work for social justice, human rights and fairness in international relations, the Australia East Timor Friendship Association of SA welcomes the announcement by Australia's Shadow Foreign Minister, Tanya Plibersek, that a future ALP government will enter fresh negotiations with Timor-Leste to establish a permanent maritime boundary between the two nations that follows the principles outlined in the UN's Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).



[Under this Convention, the mid way line between two countries represents the maritime boundary and each nation has the right to the resources in its half of the sea.]

This is a very important positive step as it will mean an end to the shameful policy of Australia, the wealthiest nation in our region, of ripping off oil and gas resources from the half of the Timor Sea belonging to Timor-Leste, the poorest nation in the region and one of the poorest in the world. It is estimated that the value of these resources being taken by Australia that should be going to Timor-Leste could be as high as \$40 billion.

This money is sorely needed by the East Timorese to rebuild their nation and develop and undertake important development for its future after the 24 years of Indonesian unlawful and brutal occupation. It should be remembered that the illegal occupation was fully supported by Coalition and ALP governments throughout this time.

After Timor-Leste's independence, the government of John Howard decided to exert pressure on the newly independent nation to take oil and gas out of its half of the Timor Sea and strong-armed the leaders of the newly independent nation into accepting an unfair agreement – the Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS).

After the Timor-Leste government made an official complaint to the International Court of Justice about Australia spying on its meetings about the CMATS deal, the Abbott government tried to subvert the course of justice by raiding the office of Timor-Leste's lawyer, Bernard Collaery, and seizing key documents and also confiscated the passport of a former Australian intelligence worker who is a key witness in the case.

Shamefully, the ALP governments of Rudd and Gillard did nothing to change this immoral policy during their terms of office between 2007 and 2013.

In 2013, AETFA SA prepared two submissions for a Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade Inquiry into Australia's relations with Timor-Leste for the Federal Parliament. The Inquiry was chaired by Nick Champion (MHR Wakefield SA).

In the same year, AETFA SA sent a delegation to meet with Nick Champion to discuss our submissions. During the discussion, our delegation raise the issue of the CMATS agreement. At first, he tried to tell us that this agreement had nothing to do with the Inquiry, which was quite ridiculous given that it is the major point of contention between the leaders of the two nations. Then he scorned the notion that the ALP should change the policy.

Australia's betrayal of the East Timorese is particularly shameful because during World War II, they gave great support to Australian commandos who were fighting the Japanese army there. After the Australians left, the Japanese military exacted a heavy revenge against the local people for giving that support and carried out a series of mass murders. These resulted in the deaths of about 40,000 people. In addition, 30,000 people lost their lives because their villages were attacked or they were caught in between combatants.

During WW2, East Timor lost about 70,000 people out of a total population of half a million. In contrast, Australia lost 40,000 lives out of a population of 7 million.

After all that the people of Timor-Leste have suffered over many years and given their WW2 sacrifice, it is time for our leaders to behave fairly and recognise the UNCLOS principle so that our former allies can rebuild their shattered lives and their destroyed infrastructure.

For these reasons, Tanya Plibersek's announcement is very welcome. If the ALP is elected at the next federal elections and it honours this promise, relations between Timor-Leste and Australia will greatly improve as will our image in the world at large.

However, it is recognised that Australia has already received a huge amount of royalties from the oil and gas in Timor-Leste's half of the Timor Sea. If a future Australian government is going to be fair, the money already received from these resources should be handed over to Timor-Leste.

AETFA SA will be supporting actions of the Timor Sea Justice Campaign in late March this year to call on the current Australian government to recognise the UNCLOS principle as Australia accepts this arrangement with other nations, but not currently with Timor-Leste."

Andrew (Andy) Alcock
Information Officer
AETFA SA Inc