

COMMENT

Oil and Recolonisation

OIL MEANS WAR. AND IT IS NOW-here so bone-chilling as in the Middle East. But oil means ethnic violence as well. And ethnic minorities in Nigeria now face 'cleansing' because of oil. Also, oil means neo-colonisation. Iraq has lost its independence because of oil wealth. And Iran may witness a barbaric re-run of Iraq war because of oil. A tiny republic East Timor that got independence after a bloody national liberation movement for about two and a half decades may be re-colonised again, thanks to oil. This time it is a low-bey player in global imperial game—Australia.

Since 1998 the Australian Government has been systematically monopolising East Timor oil from what is called the Timor Gap. And East Timor is likely to lose its right over its oil resources because of neo-colonial onslaught globally.

As early as 1893, the first non-Timorese explorations took place in Portuguese Timor. They generated small-scale exports in Laclubar, Manatuto. In 1956, the Australian company, Timor Oil Limited began off-shore explorations with many other companies joining in over the following years.

Once oil was discovered in the ocean between Indonesia and Timor (on the one hand) and Australia on the other hand, it became important to decide who "owned" the sea bed under which the oil deposits lay. From 1956 Portugal, the colonial master of Timor, claimed sovereignty according to median line principles ratified in the 1958 Geneva Convention and again in 1982 in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which came into force in November 1994. However, until 1994, the "median line" principle was not universally accepted, following the unilateral announcement in 1945 by US President Truman of the "continental shelf principle according to which the shallow areas just off the coast of each country, extending to where the sea floor drops sharply, are "owned" by the country. As it happens, application of the "continental shelf principle leaves Australia with by far the lion's share of sovereignty over the sea bed between the three countries. In the early 1970s, Australia concluded a treaty with Indonesia's puppet Suharto regime "Establishing Certain Seabed Boundaries" based on the "continental shelf principle". This treaty, however, could not affect East Timor because Portugal, its colonial master at the time, refused to participate except on the basis of the "median line" principle which Australia was not prepared to contemplate. As a result there arose what has come to be known as The Timor Gap - an area of seabed which has not been allocated to any of the surrounding countries. It covers the gap between the median line and the edge of the Australian continental shelf closest to East Timor, and it contains all the area's important oil deposits. □□□