

Aid used as front for spying: East Timor

Leo Shanahan

The Australian 11.12.13

EAST Timor's Natural Resources Minister has claimed the Australian government sent four spies under the cover of an aid project to Dili in 2004, in order to bug negotiations for a crucial gas treaty.

Alfredo Pires has also claimed Australia "stole" documents belonging to the East Timorese government in raids by ASIO. In an interview with The Australian last night, Mr Pires said four officers from the Australian Secret Intelligence Service entered East Timor "using diplomatic resources". Dili was "surmising" they gained access through an aid project at the new government headquarters.

"The bugging was done through an aid project . . . We're not sure if they were acting as aid workers," Mr Pires said.

He said there were "four people we can identify" as those responsible for the alleged bugging: "three men and one woman".

Mr Pires said that he had "no idea" whether the spies were still active in the field but had concerns for the Australian agents, whose details were now on the East Timor government's computer system.

"Our computers could be accessed . . . They could be compromised," he said.

"We also are concerned about the aid program, that normal Timorese might suspect everyone working in the aid program, which we know is full of very good people."

Mr Pires also claimed that officers from Australia's domestic spy agency, ASIO, took commercially sensitive documents relating to treaty negotiations governing billions in gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

Last week, about 15 ASIO agents raided the offices of Canberra-based lawyer Bernard Collaery, who is representing Timor in their arbitration claim against Australia at The Hague. The Australian revealed in May that the East Timor government

alleged ASIS broke into its government offices in Dili during the 2004 negotiations and bugged the Timorese cabinet room. In the wake of the Greater Sunrise espionage claims, the Timorese government has declared the Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea Treaty invalid and triggered compulsory arbitration.

Mr Pires has demanded the return of the documents by the time of his return to Timor, saying he was hoping the foreign ministers of the two nations would be able to resolve the issue. "Our lawyers had documents belong to my ministry and our country seized," he said. "I would like those stolen documents back. I'm going back on the 13th and I'm hoping to have them back before then."

A spokeswoman for Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop said there had been no approach by East Timor on the issue.

Mr Pires said the documents could be used by governments or companies to gain a commercial advantage over the fledgling nation.

"Some documents may be relating to the copy of the memorial (international law legal argument). But the lawyer also deals with other stuff, and there may be other stuff that deals with commercial in confidence for us," he said.

The home of an Australian man who is the key witness for East Timor in the arbitration claim was also raided and he had his passport seized. The man is understood to be a former senior officer with ASIS.

A spokesman for Attorney-General George Brandis declined to comment, saying it was an "ongoing operational matter".