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Palawan gov't neutral on JMSU extension

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY, Philippines -- The Palawan provincial government is not taking a position on whether to support the possible extension of the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU), which involves exploring for oil and gas with China and Vietnam in waters the province claims as its own.

Governor Joel T. Reyes said Thursday they are following the debate concerning the implications of the JMSU on the ownership of resources located on the western flank of Palawan with the inclusion of China and Vietnam in the ongoing seismic explorations.

"That really puts us in a very awkward position because the disputed areas are in our municipality. But at the same time, with due respect to our President, there is also a national policy regarding this matter," Reyes, a staunch supporter of President Macapagal-Arroyo, said.

Critics of the JMSU have warned that since the technical activities are being undertaken within Philippine waters, the administration may have compromised the country's territorial integrity over these areas.

They accuse the Philippine government of entering into the agreement in exchange for huge financial assistance packages from China, including the controversial \$329-million national broadband network project between the Arroyo government and China's ZTE Corp and the North Rail Project.

Reyes, however, said they will oppose moves to exclude the Kalayaan Islands from the baseline bill being deliberated in Congress as a measure to comply with the United Nations' impending deadline for submitting country baselines next year.

The governor said treating the Kalayaan Islands as a mere "regime of islands" outside the country's baselines will demonstrate a lack of resolve on the part of the government to assert its political authority.

"That will be a bad precedent. As far as our international standing is concerned, other neighboring countries who are watching us will just start bullying us because we will have shown that we don't have the guts," Reyes said.

He said that excluding Kalayaan from the baseline will be contrary to the government's effort to establish effective occupancy over the island as a basis for recognition by the international community.

"Kalayaan is our 23rd municipality. One of the requisites for recognition is actual occupancy of the area," he said.

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