

Breaking News / Regions

<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/regions/view/20080311-124111/Palawan-wants-bill-defining-RP-baselines-to-include-Kalayaan>

Palawan wants bill defining RP baselines to include Kalayaan

By Redempto Anda
Philippine Daily Inquirer

Posted date: March 11, 2008

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY, Philippines -- The province of Palawan, which regards the Kalayaan Islands in the Spratlys as its 23rd municipality, urged the national government on Tuesday to fast-track the passage of a pending measure in Congress that would include the municipality inside the country's baseline.

Local officials have pinned their position on the presumption that by treating Kalayaan islands as part of Palawan's land mass, the province has a leverage to demand for a share in the proceeds of offshore energy development projects in the area.

They also view the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking as a complicating factor in the development of oil and gas reserves around Palawan through the awarding of service contracts to private oil companies.

They pointed out that while JMSU was not a treaty, it bound the country into the tripartite mode of developing any oil and gas deposit that may be discovered as a result of the joint survey.

"While its intention may be valid in terms of strengthening working relations with other claimant countries, it has far reaching implications that could compromise national interests just because we have yet to establish our territorial boundaries," Representative Abraham Kahlil Mitra (First District, Palawan) told the Philippine Daily Inquirer, parent company of INQUIRER.net.

Mitra said the government should refrain from pursuing the JMSU and stick with the system of bidding out service contracts in offshore blocks as a strategy to exploit territorial waters for energy deposits.

"The service contract approach is sufficient and viable enough as a strategy to promote energy independence rather than involving other claimant countries. It becomes more problematic simply because we have not even established our territories properly," he said.

The Department of Energy has so far awarded at least 28 service contracts to private companies around the province, some of which have already discovered recoverable reserves.

Vice Governor David Ponce de Leon expressed concern over how the Philippine government would follow through the JMSU.

"While this is just a commercial agreement, not a treaty--that's a very volatile area. If they found oil and we have not firmed up our claim, that's very dangerous and could spark differences," he said.

The national government, however, is eyeing excluding the Kalayaan islands inside the baseline, and treating the same as "a regime of islands" under the Unclos (United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea) principle that recognizes claims over areas that are connected to a claimant country's continental shelf.

Representative Antonio Alvarez (2nd district) justified the inclusion of the Kalayaan Islands in the baseline by stating that Unclos allowed the country to make "an inclusive and broad claim as international law allows."

Alvarez said the immediate passage of House Bill 3216 or the baseline bill would be "important in guiding us in any agreement that we may enter into with any party or country in the future."

"The Kalayaan Island Group (KIG) has been recognized as part of the Palawan Province and our fishermen are plying these waters on a daily basis to earn their livelihood. It is compelling for us to categorically include these islands and the Scarborough Shoal within our baseline," Alvarez said in a statement.

"To the people of Palawan who greatly rely on the bounty of the sea for livelihood, not to mention the presence of oil and gas reserves, this is a very significant issue. This is not just an abstract legal concept but one that strikes at the very core of our livelihood and economic well-being," he added.

The bill, which was approved on second reading by the House of Representatives last December, proposes 135 basepoints with four baselines which encloses the main archipelago, the Scarborough Shoal and the KIG.

The KIG forms part of the Spratly Islands, which is the subject of dispute of six countries including the Philippines, China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei.

[^ Back to top](#)

©Copyright 2001-2008 INQUIRER.net, An Inquirer Company