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Palawan breaks ranks with Malacañang on baselines bill

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY, Philippines -- Local officials of Palawan have broken ranks with Malacañang over the latter's preference for treating the Kalayaan islands as outside the country's baselines.

The Palawan officials say areas of the disputed islands occupied by China and Vietnam, particularly Mischief Reef, should be clearly marked as within the national territory in the baselines bill pending in the House of Representatives.

"Why are we giving up Mischief? That is a weakening of our position over the entire island group which comprises the municipality of Kalayaan. I can't really understand what the executive department is up to," Northern Palawan Representative Antonio Alvarez told reporters in Palawan Tuesday.

Mischief Reef, a submerged coral reef system that lies within the Philippine claim, was occupied by the Chinese in 1995, prompting a howl of international protests.

China has since established a fortification in the area on the pretext of maintaining it as a haven for its fishermen.

Alvarez disclosed that administration officials, including former energy secretary Raphael Lotilla, have been doing groundwork to reverse the House position on the baselines issue.

"They [administration] are saying that our position in Palawan is parochial. I think this is beyond parochial. We are dismembering the entire country with the regime of islands position," Alvarez said.

The solon was referring to a Palace "suggestion" that Kalayaan Island Group and Scarborough Shoal in the Spratlys Islands be excluded from Philippine baselines and, instead, referred to as a regime of islands to be claimed by the Philippines in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Seas.

Alvarez proposed that the administration should let the House go ahead with its passage of House Bill 3216, or the Archipelagic Baselines Law, which the administration wants to recommit to the committee on foreign affairs.

"Let us just pass that bill and settle the matter finally in the bicameral [conference committee] level, if necessary," Alvarez said.

Earlier, the Palawan provincial board issued a resolution supporting the baselines bill and asserting the status of Kalayaan as Palawan's 23rd municipality.

The United Nations has imposed a May 2009 deadline for coastal states to submit their respective national legislation on continental shelf claims.

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