

Experts Can Air Views On Baselines Bill Through Committee Hearings - MabuhayRadio

Written by Senator Pimentel's Press Office

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Minority Leader Aquilino Q. Pimentel, Jr. (PDP-Laban) today urged the Senate committee on foreign relations anew to act on the bills seeking to draw up the country's archipelagic baselines by conducting hearings where experts can be invited to air their views on the proposal.

Senator Pimentel said there is nothing inherently wrong with the proposal of Sen. Miriam Defensor Santiago for the creation of a Congressional Commission National Territory to undertake exhaustive and authoritative study on the delineation of the baselines in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas. (UNCLOS).

However, he said he believes that the Senate should start deliberating on the baselines bills even as the Commission, to be composed of senators and congressmen, pursues its research and study. The bills were separately filed by Senators Pimentel, Edgardo Angara, Rodolfo Biazon, Juan Ponce Enrile and Antonio Trillanes.

Mr. Pimentel said that lawmakers could not afford to dilly dally on the urgent measure because of the risk that the Philippines may miss the May 13, 2009 deadline set by the United Nations, which could prejudice its bid for an expanded maritime territory under UNCLOS.

"Considering the circumstances under which the proponents of the baselines bills are acting and under which the Senate has to act, we believe that the better part of prudence dictates that we should get the proper committee to act on the bills as the Senate rules provide," the minority leader said.

"There is nothing that inhibits us from asking experts in international law to help us do our job. And from using our common sense to define our baselines as best as we can." By following the strictures of the UNCLOS and by following Senate rules, Senator Pimentel said "we may be able to unravel the mysteries of the esoteric with the help of experts so that they would now become exoteric, mundane matters understood even by the hoi polloi."

He has asked Senate President Manuel Villar to call the senators to a caucus to resolve the issue once for all in view of Santiago's insistence that the Congressional Commission should do and complete its work first before her committee can tackle the baselines bills. Santiago said that the Commission will be ready to submit its findings and recommendations by Dec. 31, 2008.

Senator Pimentel said he and other authors of the baselines bills wanted to have them processed according to Senate rules, namely: hearings are conducted, resource persons and experts are heard, a committee report follows for final action through debate and discussions on the floor of the Senate.

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In the hearings of the bills before any committee, resource persons and experts are called to dissect, scrutinize and suggest possible changes. The committee, if it believes that the suggestions are good, would accept them, after which a committee report is made and reported to the plenary for discussion, debate and legislative action.

But he said Senator Santiago wants to reverse the process by insisting that discussions on the baselines bills should be preceded by the creation of a Commission to study and recommend the course of action that should be taken by the Senate regarding the definition of the archipelagic baselines. Mr. Pimentel said "if we overextend our boundaries" in the delineation of baselines, there are procedures in international law sanctioned by the UN that can settle the matter without the use of force. # # #

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