

# DATELINE PHILIPPINES

## GMA signs Baselines Bill into law, triggers China protest

by PAOLO ROMERO & PIA LEE-BRAGO  
Philstar.com

**M**ANILA—President Arroyo has signed the law defining Philippine territory, sparking protests from China over control of strategic South China Sea islands, Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said last March 11.

"We are sending the message to the whole world that we are affirming our national sovereignty... our national interest as an independent country," Ermita said.

China, which also claims sovereignty over Scarborough Shoal, "strongly opposed" the signing of Republic Act 9522 known as the Philippine Baseline Act, which defines Philippine territorial waters and maintains the country's claim over the disputed Spratly Islands (Kalayaan Island Group or KIG) in the South China Sea and Scarborough Shoal.

Vietnam, which also has long-running claims in the Spratlys, also opposed the move.

In a statement, the Chinese embassy in Manila said the inclusion of the Huangyan Island and some islands and reefs of Nansha Islands in the Baseline Act as Philippine territory is "illegal, invalid" and totally unacceptable to the Chinese government.

"The Chinese embassy hereby expresses strong opposition and solemn protest and reiterates that Huangyan Island and Nansha Islands have always been part of Chinese territory and that the People's Republic of China has indisputable sovereignty over these islands and their adjacent waters," the embassy said.

Ermita said Mrs. Arroyo signed the bill on March 10 without fanfare as the law was just a "technical and clinical adjustment" on the country's baselines to comply with the United Nations Conven-

tion on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that was adopted by the world body in 1982 and ratified by the Philippines in 1992.

The UN has asked the Philippines and other countries that signed the UNCLOS to submit the dimensions of their continental shelf by May 13. The convention, which came into force in 1994, defines the maritime limits of signatories.

Henry Bensurto, secretary-general of the Commission on Maritime and Ocean Affairs, said the Philippines passed the law not to reiterate its claims over the Spratlys and Scarborough Shoal but to define the baseline used to determine its extended continental shelf.

He and Ermita downplayed the Chinese embassy's fresh protest, saying the protests were expected and can be handled by the mechanisms in the Code of Conduct entered into by members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China to peacefully resolve claims over the disputed islands.

"We should negotiate through peaceful means our claims because there are six claimants... but there's agreement in the Code of Conduct on how to settle claims so we don't resort to any force to settle (the dispute). We want to highlight that," Ermita said.

"We're mindful that we claim these islands...we're also mindful of the definition of national interest that we're not isolated and we interact with other nations. We have factored in that we are part of a community. We took into account the various agreements, including the Code of Conduct that was pushed by the Philippines," Bensurto said.

"We're hopeful other countries

will understand that when we passed this law for the purpose of complying with UNCLOS, we were mindful of the ASEAN Declaration on the Code of Conduct."

Under the new law, the KIG and Scarborough Shoal, which is just over a hundred nautical miles from Zambales, are not part of the territorial baselines but part of the country's territory as a "regime of islands."

Ermita said the new law amended two previous laws that were enacted prior to UNCLOS. The new baselines were necessary for the purpose of identifying the Philippines' contiguous zone, territorial waters, exclusive economic zones and continental shelf.

Under the new law, 24 nautical miles from the baselines was the country's territorial area, 200 miles from them would be the exclusive economic zone, and 350 nautical miles out would be the exclusive continental shelf.

**Caught by surprise**  
Sources said Chinese diplomats were unaware that the bill was already signed into law when they accompanied Ambassador Liu

Jianchao, former spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to Malacañang last March 11 for the presentation of his credentials.

After Congress passed the legislation last month, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Wang Guangya summoned a Philippine embassy official in Beijing and said Manila's claims over the two regions "were illegal and invalid," China's official Xinhua news agency said.

It cited Wang as saying the Philippines should take into consideration bilateral relations as well as peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Vietnam also urged the Philippines to refrain from taking action that might complicate the dispute.

The Spratlys, believed to be rich in oil, gas and fish, consist of about 100 barren islets, reefs and atolls dotting the world's busiest shipping lanes in the South China Sea.

Vietnam, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei each claim all or part of the low-lying islands. ■

## Don't politicize homecoming of Mancao-Palace

**M**ANILA—Last March 11, Malacañang said the government's efforts to bring to justice fugitive ex-police officer Cesar Mancao, who is believed to hold the key to identifying the mastermind of the Dacer-Corbato murders, should not be politicized.

Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said the main concern should be that legal procedures are followed in extraditing Mancao, one of the principal suspects in the 2000 kidnapping and murder of publicist Salvador "Bubby" Dacer and his driver, Emmanuel Corbito.

"We just have to follow the rule of law. We cannot go on with shortcuts," said Ermita.

**No contest**  
Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez said that while it would be a "plus factor" politically for the Arroyo administration if Mancao were to implicate opposition personalities to the Dacer-Corbato double murder case, it was not true that the administration had anything to do with a Mancao affidavit that is presumed to do just that.

Mancao, a former aide of Sen. Panfilo Lacson at the defunct Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Task Force, earlier told a US federal court that he would no longer contest his extradition and would return to Manila.

Gonzalez last March 10 said Mancao had implicated several people in an affidavit that he had executed in the US and which has been placed in a bank vault. Gonzalez would not elaborate on the contents of the affidavit until Mancao has returned.

**Aquino is key**  
Lacson promptly reacted to reports that Mancao had identified the mastermind in the killing, and alleged that Malacañang had pressured his former aide into naming names.

Ermita warned the public against pinning all its hopes on the

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### CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENT

## Palace cheers Teodoro's plan to run in 2010

by TJ BURGONIO  
Inquirer.net

**M**ANILA—Everything but the endorsement. Malacañang officials last March 11 cheered Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro's announcement to run for President in the 2010 elections, trumpeting his credentials and even comparing him to US President Barack Obama.

Malacañang officials have been floating the name of Teodoro as a possible candidate for President since November last year.

"He is doing the right thing, saying the right thing. As far as expressing his aspiration to be a candidate in 2010, he's a very capable person," Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita told reporters.

"I might become his PR man but he is a topnotcher in law, in the bar exam of 1989. I'll say it in one word: He has the wherewithal to aspire for higher position," Ermita said.

"How old is he? 47? 43? He's three to four years younger than President Obama. One of you is signaling me he's handsome," he said.

"I am glad to hear that he already came out because everybody had been asking what his plans are. Now that he has come out, I suppose he is one of those that will be somehow in the radar screen of surveys," he said.

The otherwise low-key Teodoro has said that he wants to become the country's next President, but concedes that securing the endorsement of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and the ruling Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats (Lakas-CMD) party is crucial.

"The President's endorsement is very important, being my direct boss," said Teodoro, 44, a nephew of former President Corazon Aquino and Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco, chair of San Miguel Corp. and head of the Nationalist People's Coalition (NPC).

Teodoro is on leave from the NPC, which is allied with GMA.

**Practical move**  
Ermita said that Teodoro was being "practical" when he indicated he would seek the endorse-



Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro

ment of Ms Arroyo, titular head of Lakas and the Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (Kampi).

"I think that's a very legitimate aspiration of an aspirant," he said.

Gabriel Claudio, presidential political adviser, also welcomed Teodoro's "emergence as presidential material."

"There is no doubt that among our national leaders, including those touted as presidential material, Gilbert is among those with youthful idealism, outstanding intellectual capability, leadership, nationalism and a firm grasp of the problems that beset our country," Claudio said in a text message.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde described Teodoro along with Vice President Noli de Castro as "presidential timber."

#### Other aspirants

The other choices of the administration included Sen. Richard Gordon and Chair Bayani Fernando of the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority, who was the first to declare his intention to run for President, officials have said.

Claudio, however, said that Teodoro, like everyone else, would undergo a selection process by Lakas and Kampi which are seeking to merge to form a formidable slate in 2010.

Ermita said that he could not say that Teodoro was leading the group pending the results of the selection process.

"I don't know yet the criteria that Secretary Claudio will present to the President as chair of the party that would be the basis for the selection of the anointed candidate," he said. ■

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