

PHILIPPINE OFFICIALS LEAVE ANTI-NUCLEAR ISSUE TO AQUINO.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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MANILA, July 19, Reuter - Philippine officials said on Tuesday that it was up to President Corazon Aquino to interpret an anti-nuclear constitutional clause that could affect the future of the two main U.S. bases in the country.

A joint executive-legislative panel set up by Aquino to draw up a bases policy indicated after a meeting that Aquino had the power to decide whether or not nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered U.S. ships and aircraft could visit the bases.

"Our decision is that it is the president who decides that," Executive Secretary Catalino Macaraig said. "The question is who will decide whether it is national interest or not to enforce the policy that is enunciated in the constitution."

Officials on the panel told reporters a clause in Manila's 1987 constitution committing the country "consistent with national interest" to a policy of freedom from nuclear weapons in its territory needed flexible interpretation.

"I am only basing my opinion on what I have read into the constitutional commission proceedings," Justice Secretary Sedfrey Ordenez said.

But despite a prediction by Aquino and U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, who visited Manila last week, that agreement on the bases was expected within weeks, talks between Philippine and U.S. officials appeared becalmed.

Philippine officials indicated at the weekend that an agreement was imminent. Talks scheduled on Monday were billed as a "make or break session."

Both sides were tight-lipped on Monday. They issued a terse statement on Tuesday saying: "There was a productive discussion on the issue of base security" -- one of the side-issues being debated -- and announcing that the next round of talks would be held on Thursday.

The talks cover compensation for the remaining period of the bases agreement, which expires in 1991, but they have also bogged down over an anti-nuclear bill passed last month by the Philippine Senate.

The bill bans nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered ships or aircraft from Philippine territory. Before becoming law it must be passed by the House of Representatives and approved by Aquino.

U.S. Ambassador Nicholas Platt warned last month that enactment of the bill would spell the end of the two countries' security relationship. Washington strictly follows a global policy of neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear weapons.

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