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Russia to Submit Arctic Claims by Year's End

By Roland Oliphant

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Polar bears approaching the decommissioned USS Honolulu submarine 500 kilometers from the north pole.

The federal government will submit its final Arctic territorial claims with the United Nations by the end of the year, the country's leading Arctic scientist said.

Artur Chilingarov, the veteran explorer who led the expedition to plant a Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole in 2007, told Rossia 24 television that Russia's claim to a portion of the Arctic shelf would be filed with the United Nations Commission on the Law of the Sea by December.

"I think we are seriously prepared," he said. "We have gathered all the necessary information needed to make a just decision, including the experience of other countries."

Chilingarov led a series of expeditions over the past few years seeking to prove that

the undersea Lomonosov Ridge is an extension of Russia's continental shelf.

If approved, the claim based on this research would see Russia gain an additional 1.2 million square kilometers of exclusive economic zone, Interfax reported.

Chilingarov's announcement came the same day the government published a new long-term strategy for Arctic development.

The State Program for the Arctic, which defines government policy for at least the next eight years, was published on the Regional Development Ministry's website Wednesday. Expert opinions on the draft are being accepted until Jan. 29.

The law would establish a mandatory review of any business activities that could pose an environmental hazard, starting from a "presumption of environmental danger of any proposed activity," RIA-Novosti reported.

In other provisions, the law would bar the privatization of any airlines in the region and allow certain regions to be closed to aircraft for environmental reasons. It would also ban off-road travel in the tundra.

While the document does make note of the need to defend the region, it does not directly mention rumored plans to close areas like the Yamal Peninsula to nonresidents.

The strategy also suggests that Russian domination of the Arctic Sea Route be written into a law, with a stipulation that at least 70 percent of ships operating in the region should be Russian.

It does, however, talk about allocating state financing for the "development and implementation of programs to attract foreign investment to the Arctic zone."

The new strategy, which will define state policy for the region for President Vladimir Putin's current presidential term and beyond, was published shortly after the United Nations Environment Program unveiled plans for a $300 million, five-year environmental undertaking in the area.

UNEP Moscow chief Vladimir Moshkalo said the Russian government had asked his agency to oversee development of the program, which will be co-funded by agencies including the Economic Development Ministry, the Environment and Natural Resources Ministry, the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

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