

DENR anticipates legal challenge to Boracay closure

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Ambulant vendors converse while on a break from selling hats and other stuff to local and foreign tourists enjoying the white sand at the famous Boracay Island. — PHILIPPINE STAR_MIGUEL DE GUZMAN

By **Victor V. Saulon**, *Sub-Editor*

THE Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said Friday it is anticipating the closure of the resort island of Boracay to be challenged before the courts, even as high as the Supreme Court.

“We are expecting it, especially from the hotels,” Undersecretary Jonas R. Leones said in a press briefing together with Secretary Roy A. Cimatu at the DENR’s head office in Quezon City.

“[They are] within their rights to seek redress from the courts,” Mr. Leones also said, adding: “What we are doing in Boracay will not only benefit the island but the entire country as well.”

Earlier this week, the DENR, Department of Tourism (DoT), and Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) recommended the closure of Boracay, with President Rodrigo R. Duterte affirming the move. The agencies will be meeting with stakeholders in April to discuss specific action plans and activities to be undertaken during the closure.

The DENR also proposed to add more government agencies in the inter-agency task force handling Boracay’s rehabilitation, as much needs to be done to fix what Mr. Cimatú described as “unbridled expansion and the influx of mass tourism” in the island.

Mr. Cimatú said other offices to be asked to join the task force are the Departments of Labor and Employment, Social Welfare and Development, Energy, Transportation, Public Works and Highways, and Health.

The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority is also proposed to be part of the team to handle the retraining of the displaced workers on the island.

“We need to restudy the master plan not only for Boracay but the entire province of Aklan as a prime tourism destination so that the jewel that the island has been known to be remains a jewel with proper and responsible care,” Mr. Cimatú said.

Mr. Leones, for his part, said the rehabilitation of Boracay is set for six months starting on April 26, 2018, although this could be shortened.

“We can shorten the closure depending on the progress of the rehabilitation efforts to be done in Boracay,” he said.

Mr. Leones said based on the discussions of the task force, five “major environmental problems” need to be addressed during the closure.

He cited as well the need to look into the drainage system, including upgrading the sewer lines with additional sewage treatment plants to accommodate the waste water being generated by the hotels and business establishments.

Mr. Leones said there is also a need to address the island’s garbage problem as it generates 90 to 115 tons of waste a day, although only 30 to 40 tons are being taken out daily.

He pointed out too the influx of tourists has also resulted in the encroachment of wetlands and forest land.

“We are also looking at the protected areas,” Mr. Leones said, adding that if these problems are addressed, the task force might be convinced to “relaunch the opening of Boracay.”

He said the islands closure to tourists is “very strict” in that it will not last no more than six months, thus “no extension.”

“But the rehab done by DENR will take a longer period,” Mr. Leones also said.

He said based on the discussions at this week’s Cabinet meeting, it was agreed that a phase-by-phase rehabilitation would not be possible as the environment problems cover the entire island.

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