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## SA territory may double under UN law

Article originally published in the Cape Times, 21 March 2006

South Africa could greatly extend its territory in an extraordinary marine land distribution exercise under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos).

"It's the biggest single distribution of territory ever... This magnitude of territory is usually only gained by nations through the process of war," said Ian McLachlan, working group chairperson of the South African Shelf Claim project.

Taking an optimistic view, the country could gain an additional 65 percent of its existing 1,5-million square kilometres of marine territory within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), including the area around Marion and Prince Edward Islands.

By comparison, South Africa's mainland territory is about 1,2-million square kilometres.

"We believe that even if we take the bottom line case, the territorial claim will be significant," McLachlan said.

The chief executive of Petroleum Agency SA, Mthozami Xiphu, said the agency had been tasked by the minister of minerals and energy with managing the project, in collaboration with other government departments with maritime responsibilities.

The project was now halfway through its seven-year term, having accumulated much geophysical, seismic, echo-sounding and other remote sense data since it was established in 2003.

Article 76 of Unclos gives the opportunity to claim territory seaward of the existing 200 sea mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), subject to complex conditions, but generally not more than 350 sea miles from the shoreline.

Xiphu said that the UN commission is considering extending the current deadline for the claim submissions of May 13, 2009, because not many of the 50 or so countries eligible to claim are likely to meet the cut-off date.

However, the South African project is still aiming at the original target date.

Russia, Brazil, Australia and Ireland are the first of the 50 potential claimants who have already submitted claims to the UN commission. South Africa is collaborating with neighbouring Namibia and Mozambique.

It is also co-operating with France, with which it might share an overlapping claim between the French Crozet Islands and the South African volcanic islands of Marion and Prince Edward.

A joint geophysical survey has already been completed on the submarine Del Cano Rise between the two island groups.

McLachlan said South Africa also had potential claims on its west and south coasts, with the largest claim being on the submarine Mozambique ridge on the east coast.

Asked about possible benefits for claiming the extended continental shelf, McLachlan said besides possible reserves of oil and gas, South Africa would also lay claim to minerals and biological resources.

"The deep ocean floor is a new world and it contains microbes and minerals and plant organisms that are quite extraordinary.

Micro-organisms, in particular, can be used to provide new pharmaceutical treatments for a variety of human ailments," said McLachlan of the deep ocean floor, which is less well-mapped than the surface of Mars.

McLachlan said it was important to note that a state's rights over the extended continental shelf seaward of its EEZ would be limited to living and non-living resources, on and under the seafloor, and did not include the



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rights to conventional fish stocks.

Xiphu said the Petroleum Agency SA was allocated R23-million for the initial four-year period ending March 2007.

He said expenditure to date was well within budget, but more money will be required to complete the final three years of the project up to 2009/10.

Xiphu said the agency was using international consultants to make sure it was planning properly, thinking right and understanding the technology. – Sapa