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Arctic claimants urged to obey U.N. rules

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By Kim McLaughlin

ILULISSAT, Greenland (Reuters) - Denmark and Norway said they hoped the five nations bordering the Arctic Ocean would agree at talks in Greenland on Wednesday to obey U.N. rules on territorial claims in the sensitive region.

Environmentalists want a ban on military activity and mineral mining in the Arctic Ocean, where higher temperatures are melting the ice, eventually enabling coastal countries to search for oil and gas thought to lie beneath the seabed.

"I hope for a concrete result," Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moller told reporters in the town of Ilulissat on his way into the meeting of senior officials from Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States.

"Those that say there is a legal vacuum in the Arctic are wrong because the U.N. Law of the Sea Convention prevails in the Arctic as it does in other oceans," said Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere.

Denmark called the meeting in its self-governing province in an effort to end squabbling over ownership of huge tracts of the Arctic seabed.

Denmark and Norway have urged all involved to abide by U.N. rules on territorial claims and hope to sign a declaration that the United Nations would rule on any disputes.

The talks will cover not only territorial claims but also cooperation over accidents, maritime security and oil spills.

Joining Moller and Stoere were Greenland Premier Hans Enoksen, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and Canadian Natural Resources Minister Gary Lunn.

Environmental groups have criticized the scramble for the Arctic, saying it will damage unique animal habitats, and have called for a treaty similar to that regulating the Antarctic, which bans military activity and mineral mining.

"We would suggest that all the nations up there should agree not to open it up for drilling," Tarjai Haaland, climate and energy campaigner with Greenpeace Nordic, told Reuters by phone.

Scientists believe rising temperatures could leave most of the Arctic ice-free in the summer months in a few decades' time.

As the ice sheet shrinks, icebergs will form and threaten shipping -- which may increase because the Northwest Passage will cut thousands of miles off some shipping routes.

Haaland said drilling for oil in the Arctic was a very bad idea because the world already had four times more fossil fuel reserves than it could afford to burn.

Under the 1982 U.N. Law of the Sea Convention, coastal states own the seabed beyond existing 200 nautical mile zones if it is part of a continental shelf of shallower waters. The rules aim to fix shelves' outer limits on a clear

geological basis, but have created a tangle of overlapping Arctic claims.

(Additional reporting by Gelu Sulugiuc in Copenhagen)

(Editing by Tim Pearce)

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