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Calvo retracts buildup support

Neil Pang | The Guam Daily Post 12 hrs ago



REVERSAL: Gov. Eddie Calvo announced he would no longer support the military buildup on Guam until the issue of H-2 workers is

"I am against this buildup until there are changes. I cannot see more construction activity going into that base." – Gov. Eddie Calvo

After Gov. Eddie Calvo announced yesterday he would no longer support the relocation of almost

5,000 U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam, certain government officials and Guam's largest business organization raised questions, or disagreed.

The governor, speaking at the Rotary Club of Guam's luncheon meeting at the Pacific Star Resort, made the announcement to prompt the federal government to approve petitions from Guam employers for foreign skilled workers on H-2B visas. Calvo also said he had asked elected Attorney General Elizabeth Barrett-Anderson to join the Guam Contractors' Association in their lawsuit against the federal government.

The governor has previously said federal immigration authorities have reversed from approving nearly 100 percent of petitions for Guam-bound, H-2B workers, to nearly 100 percent denials over the past year.

"They have done an economic warfare and sabotage," the governor said, to the disadvantage of "loyal, American citizens in American territory."

"I just started shaking the tree," Calvo said, adding that current H-2B visa denial rates present a threat to Guam's future.

"So, with a heavy heart, I am against this buildup until there are changes. I cannot see more construction activity going into that base," he said, explaining that the construction projects on the military base would deplete the availability of construction workers for local projects.

The Guam Chamber of Commerce, the largest organization of private employers and businesses on the island, said the governor's announcement was a surprise.

"We too are also very concerned about the high rate of denials of the H-2B foreign worker's visas, however we don't believe that denouncing the support of the buildup is the ideal route to take," according to the Guam Chamber.

"We believe the buildup is good for Guam both inside and outside the fence and the H-2B visa labor shortage is bad for Guam both inside and outside the fence," the business group stated.

"Our organization has always been a strong proponent of the military buildup and the economic opportunities that it has, and will provide for our island community," according to the Guam Chambe

Sen. Frank B. Aguon Jr. said the governor could have stated his position differently.

However, Aguon said, "the fact remains that there are those of us outside of the military fences who feel the pain resulting from the diminishing approvals of H-2B visas, and in the not so distant future our economy will be negatively impacted."

He said he hopes for a "mutually beneficial relationship ... while keeping our island and region safe.'

Guam Delegate Madeleine Bordallo said she agrees "Republicans and the Trump administration have not demonstrated any willingness or initiative" to address the unique challenges facing the island.

"I continue to believe that the buildup will be good for Guam and provide us with opportunities to expand and grow our community – through additional job creation as well new specialized industries in areas like telecommunications and cyber security," Bordallo said. "It's also critical for the continue security of our region, especially in light of growing threats from North Korea."

"We have invested heavily in supporting this buildup ... Turning back now may jeopardize this progress, which includes significant civilian infrastructure investments," Bordallo said, in part.

Guam "must find a way to build our economy with or without the buildup," said Speaker Benjamin Cruz.

"Just a few weeks ago, Adelup said it saw 'a ray of hope' in the Trump Administration," Cruz said. "Judging from Gov. Calvo's recent tone, that hope just hit a brick wall."

The speaker said he will speak with Calvo and Bordallo about the best way forward for Guam "and the many long-standing issues we face with the federal government.

Calvo did report slight gains in visa approval rates from 1 to 2 percent at present. He added there are 170 H-2B workers on island, down from 1,300 of these temporary foreign workers around this time last year.

Calvo explained that Guam's present labor shortage has been exacerbated by military development projects which "cannibalize" the remaining local labor force.

In taking these laborers from "outside the fence and bringing them inside the fence," Calvo said private citizens, local businesses and government projects are left with next to no available workers and are forced to either pick up the tab and pay for much more expensive laborers, or otherwise abandon their projects.

He explained that projects abandoned under such conditions represent a lost investment to Guam's economy and that as more smaller projects are abandoned, the losses in potential investments add up.

"Where is the 'One Guam' approach?" the governor asked, referring to the federal government's promise to work with Guam, as the projects related to construction of facilities for the military buildup move forward. "By the time the military feels any pain, we'll be in the ICU."

The relocation of U.S. Marines from Okinawa to a Marine Corps base that's being built in Guam is covered by a bilateral agreement between the United States and Japan. Calvo said he will write a letter to the government of Japan and to Trump about his stance.

The U.S. Congress and the Defense Department have given the military buildup projects and funding the go-signal.

The Japan government is contributing about \$3 billion toward the more than \$8 billion cost to reduce the number of Marines in Okinawa and move them to Guam, starting in about 2021.

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