

Drilling at claim site fans anger

Victoria Laurie

A JAPANESE-owned gas explorer has been warned to stop drilling in a native title claim area off the Kimberley coast, in a clash that one indigenous leader has compared to the Noonkambah dispute.

Natural gas explorer INPEX last week installed a floating rig at the deserted Maret Islands, northeast of Broome, to carry out offshore geotechnical testing.

The company has applied for permission to build a multi-billion-dollar onshore processing plant and wharf loading facilities on the uninhabited islands to process its offshore Ichthys gas deposit.

But Kimberley Land Council chairman Wayne Bergmann, who flew over the area last week, said the INPEX drilling activity breached the

Native Title Futures Act, under which proponents of exploration or mining activity must consult with registered land claimants.

"We are calling for INPEX to stop all drilling immediately, and to complete agreements with traditional owners about access."

Mr Bergmann said the Uunguu native title claim covered the islands and surrounding sea area.

Traditional owners who had accompanied him on the flight were extremely upset by the rig, he said.

"It's incredibly offensive drilling in someone's backyard without permission," Mr Bergmann said.

"We're perplexed that this company is using its might to push ahead."

He said the situation mirrored the 1979 clash between Kimberley Aborigines and US mining giant Amax, which moved a drilling rig on to a sacred Aboriginal site with the backing of the Court Liberal government.

"Last month, Eric Ripper apologised for the disgraceful treatment of Kimberley indigenous people in the Noonkambah dispute," Mr Bergmann said. "Today it seems companies are still prepared to treat traditional owners in exactly the same way."

INPEX spokesman Sean Kildare said the land council had been informed the drilling program was under way and that the company had government approval.