
TAIWAN TAKES ISSUE WITH MANILA'S SOUTH CHINA SEA ISLAND BUILDUP

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Taiwan on Monday urged all parties involved to halt any action that could escalate regional tensions in the disputed South China Sea amid ongoing construction by the Philippines on an island it occupies in the disputed region.

"Taiwan reiterates its sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and urges all parties to refrain from action that could escalate tensions in the region," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) spokesman Andrew Lee (李安) said when asked to comment on Manila's work on Thitu Island.

It is "indisputable" that the Republic of China (Taiwan) enjoys rights to these islands and their surrounding waters based on international and maritime law, Lee said.

The ROC government has protested the recent unilateral moves taken by all parties involved that heighten tensions in the region, and has urged the parties concerned to halt these actions immediately, Lee said.

The spokesman also reiterated Taiwan's stance that disputes in the South China Sea should be dealt with through a multilateral mechanism for negotiations, based on the principles of shelving differences and seeking joint development of resources.

Taiwan is also willing to engage in dialogue with other countries on an equal footing, to jointly seek to promote peace and stability and maintain freedom of navigation and overflight in the region, he said.

Lee was responding to foreign media reports that said Chinese vessels have recently been deployed near Thitu Island -- located about 425 kilometers west-northwest of the island of Palawan -- during the ongoing rehabilitation of the Philippine-controlled island.

Citing satellite images, Washington-based think tank Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative first reported the Chinese presence on Feb. 6.

Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana told Philippines media last Friday that his country will continue to carry out its construction on the island despite reports of Chinese paramilitary forces gathering nearby.

"The presence of militia on the Chinese man-made structures is no surprise to us as they have been there since 2012," Lorenzana was quoted as saying in an English-language Philippine Daily

Inquirer report.

"We expect other countries to respect Philippine sovereignty, and to conduct themselves in a civilized manner befitting members of the global community," he said in a statement.

According to the Philippines news report, the work on a beaching ramp on Thitu Island is expected to be finished by the first quarter of 2019.

The repair of the runway and the construction of barracks, desalination facilities, a sewage disposal system, conventional and renewable power generation facilities, lighthouses, shelters and storage facilities for fishermen, will immediately follow, it said.

With an area of 0.37 square kilometers, Thitu Island, locally known as Pag-asa, is the largest of nine features the Philippines holds in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

Six countries -- Taiwan, China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei -- claim all or part of the South China Sea, which is said to be rich in resources.

Taiwan controls Taiping, the largest of the Spratly Islands, which is located some 1,600 kilometers from Kaohsiung. With an area of 0.51 square kilometers, it has 200 Coast Guard officers stationed there and a few civilian residents.

<http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201902110021.aspx>

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