

Taiwan leader makes 1st foreign trip as China keeps watch

24/06/2016 21:43 by admin

TAIPEI, Taiwan: Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen departed Friday on her first overseas trip since taking office last month, amid speculation that China may seek to tighten its diplomatic stranglehold on the self-governing island it claims as its own territory.

Tsai left on separate visits to allies Panama and Paraguay, stopping in Miami on the way and in Los Angeles on the way home. She is due to attend the formal opening of new ship locks on the Panama Canal before delivering a speech to Paraguay's parliament on Tuesday.

Taiwan has formal diplomatic relations with just 22 nations as a result of China's efforts to isolate the island. Most allies are in Central America, the Caribbean, Africa and the South Pacific.

Speaking ahead of her departure, Tsai said the main goal of her visit was to "raise Taiwan's international visibility" and strengthen economic and trade relations with the country's diplomatic partners in Latin America. She also stressed that Taiwan's foreign relations should encompass countries that don't recognize the island as well as non-governmental actors.

"Making friends should not be limited to official diplomatic relations," she said.

Meetings with heads of state from Taiwan's diplomatic allies could be especially important at a time when some observers see China preparing to increase its diplomatic pressure in order to compel the independence-leaning Tsai to explicitly endorse Beijing's stance that Taiwan is part of China.

A renewed effort to win away Taiwan's remaining allies, primarily through offers of economic assistance, would be an indication that China plans to get tough on her administration.

China in March established formal diplomatic ties with the small African nation of Gambia, which had severed relations with Taiwan in 2013. That was seen as a move toward abandoning the unspoken diplomatic truce between the sides that lasted for eight years under Tsai's China-friendly predecessor.

- AP