

Philippines lodges protest against China's weapons installation on islands

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Manila: After facing criticism for being "soft" on China, Philippines has finally filed a low-key diplomatic protest with Beijing following reports that the latter has installed anti-aircraft and anti-missile weapons on its man-made islands in the strategically vital South China Sea, the country's top diplomat said Monday.

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Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay said the diplomatic communication was issued after the report came out last month.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies report said anti-aircraft guns and weapons systems designed to guard against missile attacks appear to have been placed on all seven of China's newly created islands.

Yasay told CNN Philippines that Manila had responded, but did so quietly.

"We have taken action on that, we have issued a note verbale," he said, referring to a diplomatic communication that is issued in the third person and is not signed. It is considered less formal than a letter of protest.

He did not say when it was issued, adding it was a matter that he did not want to discuss.

"I just want to assure the Filipino people that when we take action at engaging China in this dispute, we do not want to take such aggressive, provocative action that will not solve the problem," he said.

"We cannot engage China in a war."

Nevertheless, he said, "when there are reports about the build-up of weapon systems in the area, during our watch we made sure that the interests and rights of the Philippines are properly protected."

Beijing says the artificial islands are intended to boost maritime safety in the region while downplaying their military utility. They also buttress China's claim to ownership of practically the entire South China Sea.

Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei also claim territory in the waterway, through which an estimated \$5 trillion in global trade passes each year.

After China took control of disputed Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and blocked Filipinos from the rich fishing area, then President Benigno Aquino III brought his country's territorial disputes with Beijing to international arbitration. China ignored the Philippine case and refused to recognize the outcome, which was heavily in favor of the Philippines.

President Rodrigo Duterte, who succeeded Aquino in June, has taken steps to mend the strained relations with China. He also has taken an antagonistic stance toward outgoing President Barack Obama's administration after the U.S. leader criticized his deadly crackdown on drugs.

In the Monday interview, Yasay said Duterte is expected to visit Russia sometime in May, and has been invited to both Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russian President Vladimir Putin's hometown.

Several agreements may be signed during the visit, including a defense cooperation pact, he added.

- (With inputs from AP)