

MND censures 24 officers over Ching Fu

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Then-vice minister of national defense Lee Hsi-ming, who is currently serving as the chief of general staff, is pictured on Feb. 24.

Photo: Tu Chu-min, Taipei Times

The Ministry of National Defense (MND) yesterday censured a number of top navy officers, including Vice Minister of National Defense Admiral Pu Tze-chun (浦澤春) and Chief of General Staff Admiral Lee Hsi-ming (李希明), in connection with a minesweeper procurement scandal.

Disciplinary action was doled out for misconduct in contracting Ching Fu Shipbuilding Co (慶富造船) to build the vessels and a report on the minesweeper program presented by defense officials in the legislature last year, the ministry told a news conference.

A total of 24 officers were disciplined, it said.

A ministerial task force was called on Nov. 2 after an Executive Yuan investigative report found fault with the military's handling of the contract with Ching Fu to build six minesweepers, the ministry said.

The probe found flaws in the military's pre-bidding preparations, the contract, the process for awarding the bid and supervision of the contractor's compliance with its obligations, it said.

Eighteen admirals and captains were disciplined for their role in the procurement, including Pu, who received a demerit.

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Lee and Navy Commander Rear Admiral Huang Shu-kuang (黃淑光), and former deputy minister of national defense Admiral Chen Yung-kang (陳雲 kang) each received two warnings.

Vice Admiral Huang Hsi-ju (黃希九), procurement division chief of the ministry's Armaments Bureau, received a demerit.

Nine navy admirals and captains were censured for misinforming lawmakers on the progress that Ching Fu was making on the minesweeper program during a budget report on Nov. 17 last year, the ministry said.

The officers presented a report that was inaccurate, the ministry said, adding that the incident reflected organizational failures on multiple levels of the ministry.

Four of the nine censured for making inaccurate reports to the legislature were also involved in the minesweepers' procurement.

Armaments Bureau Director-General Vice Admiral Mei Chia-shu (梅志淑) received one demerit and three warnings for his conduct in the procurement process and the budget report.

The officers the ministry censured are currently serving or had served at influential ministerial posts, as well as Navy Command Headquarters and the navy's Planning Division.

The ministry's internal investigation is ongoing and it has informed prosecutors of its findings, which might result in criminal proceedings, it said.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) vowed to thoroughly investigate the minesweeper scandal, address the government's shortcomings and forge ahead with the domestic warship program.

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“We will find out the truth and uphold the highest standards of accountability. This program that was initiated by previous administration is clearly flawed. The program must be subjected to strict scrutiny, from decisionmaking to bidding, syndicated loans and contract supervision,” she said in a statement.

“Each and every relevant agency must fully cooperate with the investigation... Any individual who is guilty of corruption will receive no leniency, regardless of who they are or what rank they hold,” she said.

The government will keep its focus on problem-solving and correct errors regardless of when they first occurred, she said, adding that the nation needs a more effective procurement system that excludes unsuitable contractors.

Her administration will continue its policy to develop a domestic shipbuilding program, Tsai said.

“It is my hope that this error and failure will be a lesson for our armed forces to find the right path forward,” she said.

“The government’s resolve to be self-sufficient in national defense is unshakable. We will not allow an isolated incident to affect our determination to have navy ships built domestically,” she said.

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