

Taiwan said to be asked to join US relief drill

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The US Navy has invited Taiwan to participate in the Pacific Partnership humanitarian relief training mission in the Solomon Islands in August, a senior defense official said on condition of anonymity.

Washington has been working toward giving Taiwan a greater role in the Pacific Partnership long before the US Senate began mulling hospital ship visits to Taiwan, although those efforts have received little publicity, the official said.

Taiwanese military physicians conducted a joint exercise with the US in Kiribati last year, the official said, adding that the yearly drills alternate between the Solomon Islands and Kiribati.

The Solomons and Kiribati are diplomatic allies of Taiwan.

However, in the event of a natural disaster in the South Pacific region, the scheduled drills would be revamped accordingly, the official said.

The training mission would simulate a natural disaster that results in a large-scale outbreak of infectious disease, the official said.

Military medical personnel taking part in the exercise would be expected to organize relief for the crisis, with particular attention being paid to fielding experts in treatment, patient care, public health and epidemiology, the official said.

Developing and sustaining rapid disaster response capabilities for military medical corps are of increasing importance in light of elevated tsunami and earthquake risks throughout the region, as well as the outbreaks of infectious diseases that follow natural disasters, the official said.

Major General Chen Jiann-torng (陳建榮) has played a key role in the implementation of

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cooperation with the US in military medicine, the official said.

Chen, who is expected to be promoted to lieutenant general this month, said the Medical Affairs Bureau aims to improve diplomatic ties through military medicine and by strengthening the armed forces' medical capabilities.

Performing those tasks is part of the nation's obligation as a member of the international community, he said.

Asked yesterday if he could confirm the August mission, Ministry of National Defense spokesman Major General Chen Chung-chi (陳重奇) refused to comment.

Chieh Chung (齊中), a research fellow at the National Policy Foundation, said that in the face of pressure from China, Taiwan could increase its international and military presence by participating in international humanitarian aid drills and exchanges with other countries.

There is precedent for Taiwan to participate in international humanitarian relief efforts, he said, citing the navy's delivery of relief supplies to the Philippines, under the direction of the US Pacific Command, after Typhoon Haiyan killed 6,300 people there in 2013.

If Taiwanese medics were allowed aboard US Navy ships to join US-led medical assistance efforts, it would be a good strategy to boost the nation's international participation, Chieh said.

Additional reporting by CNA

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