

Action needed on Philippines

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Public outrage over the killing of a Taiwanese fisherman by a Philippine government vessel last week is more than a national sentiment. The tragic event is a reminder of the dangerous situation Taiwanese fishermen have faced over the years operating in disputed waters, and adds a new incident in ongoing conflicts over the South China Sea. President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration must take a tough stance to protect our fishermen's rights and resolve fishing disputes between the two countries.

Under pressure from the public, Ma on Saturday issued an ultimatum to the Philippines, demanding that it arrest those responsible for the death of the fisherman, issue a formal apology, compensate the victim's family and launch negotiations on fishery agreements with Taiwan.

Ma said that if Manila failed to respond to these demands within 72 hours, the government would freeze Philippine worker applications, recall the Republic of China (ROC) representative in Manila and ask the Philippine representative in Taiwan to return to Manila to help in the investigation.

In view of Manila's defense of the shooting as having been carried out while trying to prevent illegal fishing in its waters, the ultimatum will hardly pressure Philippine authorities to take responsibility for the incident. Tougher efforts are needed to protect Taiwanese fishermen's rights and maintain national dignity.

Rival territorial claims in the South China Sea among competing nations vying for valuable fishing and energy resources have caused tensions for years, and Taiwanese fishermen have been arrested and detained by the Philippines in the past.

By opening fire on the Taiwanese fishing boat and killing the fisherman, the Philippines has violated the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which bans use of force against any unarmed fishing boat. The Ma administration should not passively wait for "positive responses" from the Philippines.

In addition to intensifying patrols in disputed waters to protect fishermen's fishing rights, the

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government should demand that Manila immediately start negotiating a fishery agreement.

The newly signed Taiwan-Japan fisheries agreement covering the Diaoyutai Islands (釣魚台), which allows fishing vessels from both countries to operate in a large area within the designated zone without being subject to the jurisdiction of the other side, should serve as a model for a pact with Manila.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Saturday gave Philippine Representative Antonio Basilio a copy of the Taiwan-Japan fisheries agreement, but the Philippine government has yet to respond to the proposal.

The Philippines' adherence to a "one China" policy has been a major political obstacle to signing fisheries agreement with Taiwan in the past, and tensions in the South China Sea have been raised in recent months due to China's claims of its sovereignty over the area.

The government's success in concluding 17 years of negotiations with Japan and expanding fishing rights in the East China Sea came at a time when diplomatic tension between China and Japan has escalated.

In the attempt to negotiate an agreement with the Philippines, the government should consider the leverage we can use and create more advantages if it seeks to follow the negotiation model of the Taiwan-Japan fisheries agreement.

After the Ma administration issued its ultimatum to the Philippines, one thing was clear: The public demands a tough stance from the government. The authorities must show their determination. It must bring more pressure to bear on Manila to negotiate and ensure there will not be a repeat of Thursday's incident.

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