

Taiwan on alert over sinking of S Korean vessel

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On being informed that a South Korean naval patrol vessel sank in disputed maritime waters off the divided peninsula, President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), on a state visit to Palau, called an emergency meeting of security officials on Friday night and ordered the activation of Taiwan's national security mechanism, Presidential Office spokesman Lo Chih-chiang (羅智強) said.

Ma also held a conference call yesterday morning with officials in Taipei, including Vice President Vincent Siew (宋楚瑜), Minister of National Defense Kao Hua-chu (高華柱), Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登益) and Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平), to gather further information, Lo said.

"The president wants the public to rest assured that the government will keep a close eye on the situation and make all necessary preparations," Lo said.

Palau was the sixth and final leg of Ma's week-long diplomatic tour of Taiwan's six South Pacific allies. Ma decided to stick to his itinerary in Palau before flying back to Taipei late last night, Lo said. Officials traveling with the president, including National Security Council -Secretary-General Hu Wei-jen (胡偉建) and Minister of Foreign Affairs Timothy Yang (楊毅), recommended that the government continue to operate normally and the military maintain a general alert, Lo said.

In Taipei, Ministry of National Defense Spokesman Major General Yu Sy-tue (余天爵) said the ministry was watching the situation carefully and was in close contact with the Presidential Office, the Executive Yuan and national security units.

Yu said military officials would stay on "high" alert, while the -military would maintain -regular -operations and make adjustments when new information is received.

The ministry said that Chief of General Staff Lin Chen-yi (林建豐) and three deputy chiefs of general staff have been at the military's Hengshan Headquarters — the nation's emergency military command center — monitoring developments.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman James Chang (張善政) announced that the ministry had established an emergency task force led by Deputy Minister Shen Lyh-shun (沈呂聖人) and that this would keep in close contact with Taiwan's representative office in Seoul, the American Institute in Taiwan and the Taipei Economic and Culture Representative Office in the US, and pass any intelligence received up the chain of command.

Some Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lawmakers yesterday said Ma's activation of the national security mechanism was an over-reaction, with DPP Legislator William Lai (賴清德) chiding Ma for largely ignoring the more serious threat in the Taiwan Strait with China targeting more than 1,000 missiles at Taiwan.

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At a separate setting yesterday, Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登益) said the government's response to the South Korean incident was "appropriate," dismissing DPP allegations of over-reaction.

"It's an appropriate reaction as the military did not increase the alert level. If we had not reacted then that would have been irresponsible," Wu said.

Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator Ting Shou-chung (丁守中) said he didn't find the government's response to the incident to be excessive.

"Despite the fact that the incident took place some distance from Taiwan, I would rather see the government ready for any eventuality than sitting on its hands doing nothing," Ting said.

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