

Taipei waits for answer from Manila

Written by Taipei Times

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Taipei expects to hear from Manila by midnight today on four demands it made after a Taiwanese fisherman was shot dead by Philippine Coast Guard personnel last week.

Minister of Foreign Affairs David Lin (林德福) told lawmakers yesterday that Philippine Representative to Taiwan Antonio Basilio has assured him that Malacanang Palace will have a formal response to the demands before the 72-hour ultimatum, issued on Saturday, expires.

Lin said Basilio promised him on Sunday night that “he would make the utmost efforts” to find a solution to the situation when he returned to his country.

According to a Central News Agency report from Manila, Philippine President Benigno Aquino III presided over a confidential meeting to discuss issues, including the incident, which Basilio attended.

Philippine coast Guard personnel on board a maritime surveillance vessel on Thursday last week attacked a Taiwanese fishing boat, the Kuang Ta Hsing No. 28, killing Hung Shih-cheng (洪士成) and leaving the boat riddled with bullets.

President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) on Saturday demanded the Philippines apologize, compensate Hung’s family, investigate the incident and punish the perpetrators, as well as begin talks over a fisheries agreement as soon as possible.

Ma has threatened to freeze Philippine migrant workers’ applications, recall Taiwan’s representative to the Philippines and expel Basilio if Manila fails to answer the demands in a positive manner.

“We will immediately impose the sanctions if we find the response from [Manila] to be unacceptable,” Lin said when questioned by lawmakers at a meeting of the legislature’s Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee.

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Lin dismissed lawmakers' concerns that Basilio might not return to Taiwan if Manila rejected the demands, saying "It's unlikely."

Late last night, ministry spokesperson Anna Kao (高安) said the ministry had learned that Basilio is scheduled to return to Taipei today.

In response to doubts expressed by lawmakers about the effectiveness of the threatened sanctions in getting the Philippines to agree to the demands, Lin said that they were solemn and serious requests that the Philippines had to respond to.

"We do not rule out additional sanctions," Lin said, but ruled out the possibility of armed conflict.

Asked by lawmakers about the possibility of cooperation between Taiwan and China in protecting fishing boats in the disputed waters, Lin rejected the idea.

Lin said he "didn't see this happening" because the Philippines has been intimidated by Beijing into upholding the "one China" principle and not talking with Taiwan about a fisheries agreement to settle disputes.

"The mainland [China] did not help us [in this regard]," Lin said.

At a separate setting, Benjamin Ho (何志偉), director-general of the ministry's Department of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said the government informed the US Department of State of the ultimatum before it was delivered.

On Sunday, Philippine Presidential Office deputy spokesperson Abigail Valte issued a statement expressing heartfelt sorrow over Hung's death and extended sympathies and condolences to his family.

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Valte said the Philippine government would conduct an “impartial, transparent and expeditious” investigation into the tragedy.

She said that the Kuang Ta Hsing No. 28 was “one of the fishing vessels reportedly poaching in the area” and that the maritime control surveillance was carrying out its duty to combat illegal fishing within the maritime jurisdiction of the Philippines.

Presidential Office spokesperson Lee Chia-fei (李顯基) on Sunday called the statement “flippant” and said it was insincere.

Meanwhile, Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) said that as long as the situation remained unresolved, the city would suspend all exchanges with the Philippines.

Aquino yesterday said the country’s representative office in Taipei would be the lead agency in charge of the issue, in accordance with Manila’s “one China” policy.

“I asked the secretary of foreign affairs to monitor, but the lead person has to be MECO [the Manila Economic and Cultural Office] because of the ‘one China’ policy,” GMA News reported him as saying.

Additional reporting by staff writer

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