

Virus Outbreak: President apologizes for ship infections

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President Tsai Ing-wen yesterday arrives at a news conference at the Presidential Office Building in Taipei at which she apologized for the handling of a COVID-19 cluster on board the navy supply ship *Panshih*.

Photo: CNA

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) yesterday apologized for the handling of a cluster of COVID-19 cases on board a navy ship that has left 28 crew infected, saying that as commander-in-chief, she holds ultimate responsibility for the military.

In an address at the Presidential Office in Taipei, Tsai acknowledged that the outbreak on the supply ship *Panshih* (磐石) has drawn a great deal of attention from the public.

As commander-in-chief, “the military’s business is my business,” Tsai said.

Although the military has done much to bolster Taiwan’s disease prevention efforts, it made many errors in its handling of the *Panshih* case, she said, apologizing for those errors causing a public health risk.

Tsai said that she had asked the military to rectify the situation as quickly as possible, adding that the military’s identification on Tuesday night of four areas of negligence in its handling of the case represented only the beginning of a full investigation into the matter.

“We will not attempt to evade responsibility for this,” Tsai said.

The nation remains in a state of readiness not only against the novel coronavirus, but also in terms of national security, she said.

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Citing movements over the past month by the Chinese military, Tsai said that Taiwan's armed forces would continue to conduct essential training and maintain a standard level of combat readiness.

The president was responding to growing controversy over the *Panshih*, which as part of a three-ship "Friendship Flotilla" that conducted a training mission in Palau from March 12 to 15.

The flotilla returned to Zuoying Naval Base in Kaohsiung on April 9, but the ships' crews were not allowed to disembark until Wednesday last week due to a directive that sailors are only allowed to disembark 30 days after docking in another nation.

After the Central Epidemic Command Center on Saturday and Sunday announced that 24 people on board the *Panshih* had been infected with COVID-19 — a number that has since risen to 28 — suspicions were raised that the military failed to report possible cases of the disease on board the ship.

On Monday, the Ministry of National Defense said that it had reviewed the ship's medical records, which showed that 70 crew members made 71 medical visits, with five having a fever.

However, that night it said that a second review of the ship's medical records found that 148 crew members sought medical treatment 226 times, including 10 visits for upper respiratory symptoms.

On Tuesday evening, Minister of National Defense Yen De-fa (嚴德發) announced the removal of two admirals from their posts pending further investigation of the navy's handling of the incident, saying that he was willing to accept any punishment from Tsai, including handing in his resignation.

Following her speech, Tsai was asked to address not only the government's response to the incident, but also the overall purpose of the training mission, given the clear risks posed by the

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global spread of the disease.

Some media personalities have speculated that the flotilla might have made other stops, as it could have returned to Zuoying sooner.

Asked about the speculation, Tsai said that she could not reveal the flotilla's exact mission, but added: "If you are asking me whether there were other destinations besides Palau, the answer is 'no.'"

Separately, the president was asked to comment on Yen's assertion on Tuesday that he approved the mission on Feb. 20 and reported it to Tsai, who he said "respected" the decision.

Tsai confirmed that she had been informed of the mission during a routine report from the ministry, but played down her role in the military's planning process.

"The decision was already made — the president should respect it," Tsai said.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2020/04/23](#)