

Philippine coast guard kills Taiwanese fisherman in disputed waters

Joseph Santolan
14 May 2013

Relations between Taiwan and the Philippines soured dramatically over the weekend, in the wake of the Philippine shooting and killing an unarmed Taiwanese fisherman in disputed waters between the two countries. Taipei has demanded that Manila issue an apology, punish those responsible, and compensate the victims by May 15 or the Taiwanese government will place a ban on the entry of any new Filipino workers to the country.

On May 7, the *China Daily* reported that a flotilla of thirty Chinese fishing vessels was sailing for the disputed South China Sea to conduct a forty-day fishing expedition. The announcement occurred in the final days before the May 13 interim elections in the Philippines; politicians and the Philippine press competed with each other to denounce this as an “invasion” of Philippine waters, and called upon President Aquino’s government and the Armed Forces of the Philippines to prevent it.

No group was more strident than Akbayan, a “left” political party formed in the break-up of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines and now a coalition partner with President Aquino’s Liberal Party. Their congressional representative, Walden Bello, stated: “This is tantamount to an invasion. Now they are sending their fishing vessels. If we don’t act strongly to defend and secure our sovereignty, soon they might send their naval warships and troops as well.”

He called on the Philippine Coast Guard to “seize any Chinese vessel” and “arrest its crew.”

On Thursday, May 9, the Philippine Coast Guard accosted not a Chinese, but a Taiwanese fishing vessel in the disputed waters of the Bashi channel between Taiwan and the Philippines. The Philippine coast guard turned its machine gun on the small boat and fired more

than fifty rounds at the ship and its unarmed crew. A sixty-five year Taiwanese old fisherman, Hung Shih-cheng, was killed.

This occurred 170 nautical miles south of the main island of Taiwan, and within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of both countries, defined as a sea zone within 200 nautical miles of the coast. The boat was the *Guang Ta Hsin 28*, a small, 15-ton capacity fishing vessel, with a crew of four. Hung Shih-cheng was sailing with his son, his son-in-law, and an Indonesian crew member.

The Philippine Coast Guard initially denied the event, stating that they had no ship in the vicinity. On May 10, faced with public outcry in Taiwan and a sharp backlash from Taiwanese president Ma Ying-jeou, the Aquino administration admitted that a Taiwanese fisherman had been killed. They claimed that the fishing vessel had attempted to ram the coast guard cutter.

The event dominated the Taiwanese media over the weekend and received very little coverage in the Philippine press, which was pre-occupied with yesterday’s elections.

The sudden escalation of tensions between Taiwan and the Philippines in the South China Sea result from Washington’s aggressive drive by in the region to encircle China. In its provocative push to contain China, the Obama administration has encouraged its allies to stake out aggressive maritime claims in the South China Sea region and stoke a chauvinist political climate at home.

The US State Department issued a statement on Monday saying that Washington “regretted the tragic death of a Taiwanese fishing boat master.” The statement did not indicate who was responsible for the death.

On Saturday the office of president Ma Ying-jeou issued “four solemn requests” and an ultimatum to Aquino. Ma demanded that Manila apologize for the “brutal and cold-blooded act,” compensate the family of the victim, investigate and punish the perpetrators, and commence talks over fishing rights.

Should these requests not be granted by midnight on May 14, Taipei is threatening to freeze all work visa applications from the Philippines, recall its diplomatic representative from the Philippines, and send Manila’s representative back to the Philippines.

The Philippine diplomatic representative in Taiwan, Antonio Basilio, offered his country’s “sincerest condolences and apologies” to the family of the slain fisherman. He pointedly stated, however, that this was not an apology to Taiwan or the Taiwanese government, and should not be construed as fulfilling President Ma’s demand.

A Taiwanese presidential spokesperson denounced the Aquino administration’s response as “flippant.”

Ma called upon the Coast Guard administration to dispatch ships to the disputed waters and increase patrols to “protect Taiwanese fishermen.”

Filipino workers are the third-largest group of foreigners in Taiwan, with 85,000 official Filipino residents as of March 2013. Bilateral trade between the Philippines and Taiwan totaled \$6.17 billion in 2011, with Taiwan listed as the Philippines’ sixth-largest trading partner.

An Aquino spokesperson said that the commander and crew of the Coast Guard vessel, MCS3001, had been relieved of their duties and were to be subject to an investigation. The Philippine response to the demands from Taipei would be issued following the investigation which officials stated would take a week, well past the deadline set by Ma.

Yesterday, Philippine diplomatic representative in Taiwan, Antonio Basilio, was recalled to Manila.

Meanwhile, computer hackers in Taiwan have begun conducting cyberattacks on Philippine websites, taking down or defacing prominent government sites. Philippine hackers have begun attempting to do the same to Taiwanese government websites.

Both groups purport to be members of the cyber-anarchist network Anonymous. There was speculation in the Philippine press that the attacks undertaken by the Taiwanese hackers on the day of the Philippine

election may have compromised portions of the electronic balloting.



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