

Philippines impounds suspected North Korean ship

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8 March 2016

Just days after the UN Security Council imposed harsh new sanctions on North Korea over its nuclear test and rocket launch this year, the Philippines became the first country to carry out significant action in enforcing them.

On Saturday, the Philippine coast guard and port authorities seized a suspected North Korean cargo ship docked at Subic Bay port. The following day, a government official declared that President Benigno Aquino intended to impound the ship and deport its North Korean crew of 21.

While Philippine officials invoked the UN resolution passed last Wednesday, the government undoubtedly acted with the approval, if not on the direct orders, of Washington. The US rammed through the new UN sanctions and is determined to ensure they are enforced, particularly by China.

The MV Jin Teng, a 6,830-tonne general cargo ship, is flagged under Sierra Leone but is supposedly owned by the Ocean Maritime Management (OMM), a North Korean company. The corporation allegedly illegally shipped arms to the Middle East and exported ballistic-missile technology to Africa.

As a result, OMM was blacklisted in 2014 and its assets, including its ships, could have been seized even before the latest UN resolution. According to the *Financial Times*, the US government claims that OMM has continued to operate through front companies and representative offices to evade sanctions.

On what basis the ship is being impounded is unclear. Philippine Coast Guard commander Raul Belesario said the ship's documents indicated it was owned by a company based in the British Virgin Islands and managed by a firm in China's Shandong province.

The MV Jin Teng had been anchored in the Subic Bay since February 28, having arrived from Indonesia with a shipment of palm kernel products, which are used locally as a livestock feed. It was finally able to dock on March 3.

The Philippine Coast Guard inspected the ship twice. Coastguard spokesman Armand Balilo admitted that no "weapons of mass destruction" or other banned goods were found. The ship had been scheduled to proceed to the port of Zhanjiang in China.

The ship was initially prevented from leaving Subic Bay on the pretext of four minor safety violations, including "inadequate accommodation."

The latest UN Resolution 2270 widens previous bans to include the importation by North Korea of all arms imports, items connected to its nuclear and missile programs and various luxury goods.

In a bid to strangle the North Korean economy, the US-led sanctions bar North Korean exports of gold, titanium ore, vanadium ore and rare earth minerals. North Korea is also banned from exporting coal and iron ore, unless the proceeds are for "livelihood purposes."

To enforce the bans, the UN resolution mandates member states to search all cargo passing through their territory, whether by land, air or sea.

Clearly the goods on board the MV Jin Teng were not banned, nor were they intended for shipment to North Korea. Unless the ship can be proven to be the asset of a banned North Korean entity, there appears to be no legal basis for impounding it. According to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the ship had been operating into Subic Bay for some time without incident.

The Philippine administration is proceeding nevertheless. Foreign Ministry spokesman Charles Jose claimed that Philippine authorities were acting in accordance with the latest UN resolution. "The most important thing is to impound the vessel so it cannot engage in economic activity that would benefit North Korea," he said. The UN resolution, however, does not ban all North Korean economic activity.

The Philippine administration has been in the forefront of the US "pivot to Asia" by aggressively pushing its

territorial disputes in the South China Sea with China. The country's Supreme Court has just upheld a new basing agreement with the US, enabling US military forces extensive access to Philippine military facilities, including the former American naval base at Subic Bay.

As part of the “pivot,” the US has been intensifying pressure on North Korea as a means of justifying its heavy military presence in Japan and South Korea, which are integral to the US military build-up throughout the region against China. Beijing only agreed to the latest UN sanctions on North Korea, after being strong-armed by Washington, which has imposed unilateral penalties on individuals and entities engaged in a wide range of banned activities with North Korea. China is by far North Korea's largest trading partner.

By seizing the MV Jin Teng, the Philippine government has sent a message, on Washington's behalf, that the latest sanctions have to be enforced. Moreover, the dubious grounds for impounding the ship make clear that the US is intent on stopping all “economic activity that would benefit North Korea”—whether it is covered by UN resolutions or not.

The ship's seizure is another demonstration of the close integration of Manila into the US “pivot” and preparations for war against China.

On January 24, the US Navy dispatched the USS Curtis Wilbur from Subic Bay to carry out the second so-called “freedom of navigation” operation in the South China Sea. The guided missile destroyer intruded within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese-administered Triton Island in the Paracels, then returned to Subic Bay.

Behind the backs of the Philippine population, the Aquino administration's willingness to support US provocations against China is ensuring that the country is being swept up in the intensifying geo-political maelstrom that is driving toward war.



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