

PHILIPPINES ACCUSES CHINA OF 'INCURSION' IN DISPUTED SEA

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Troubled waters: Some of the over 200 Chinese boats moored at Whitsun Reef, South China Sea, in this file photo. AP

The Philippines on Sunday accused China of "incursion" after more than 200 militia boats were spotted near a disputed reef in the South China Sea, in a rare rebuke of its superpower neighbour.

The Philippine coast guard detected the boats "in line formation" at the boomerang-shaped Whitsun Reef, around 320 km (175 nautical miles) west of Palawan Island on March 7.

"We call on the Chinese to stop this incursion and immediately recall these boats violating our maritime rights and encroaching into our sovereign territory," Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said in a statement.

"This is a clear provocative action of militarizing the area. These are territories well within Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone."

Mr. Lorenzana said the government was considering "appropriate action" to protect Filipino fishermen, the country's marine resources and maintain peace and stability in the area.

Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin said on Twitter he had lodged a diplomatic protest over the ships.

The Chinese Embassy in Manila did not respond to a request for comment.

A government task force charged with monitoring the contested waters announced Saturday the detection of around 220 "Chinese Maritime Militia Vessels" earlier this month. "Despite clear weather at the time, the vessels massed at the reef showed no fishing activities," the agency said.

The U.S. has previously accused China of using maritime militia to "intimidate, coerce and threaten other nations" over its claims to almost the entire South China Sea.

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