

## VESSELS IN DISPUTED SEA ARE FISHING BOATS: CHINA

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Chinese vessels gathered near a disputed reef in the South China Sea are “fishing boats” sheltering from poor weather, the Foreign Ministry said on Monday, a day after the Philippines described their presence as an incursion.

The Philippines on Sunday said more than 200 militia boats were spotted “in line formation” at the boomerang-shaped Whitsun Reef, around 175 nautical miles west of Palawan Island on March 7.

Manila called on China to “immediately recall these boats violating our maritime rights and encroaching into our sovereign territory”.

But Beijing disputed the claim, saying that “for a long time, Chinese fishing boats have been fishing in waters near the reef”, which it said was a part of the contested Spratly Islands. “Recently, due to conditions at sea, some fishing boats have been sheltering from the wind near the Whitsun Reef,” Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said. “We believe this is very normal, and hope all parties can consider it rationally.”

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