

19/09/1999

Diplomacy, tolerance will help in solving dispute over isles

K.P. Waran

THE contentious Spratly Islands, being claimed wholly or in part by six countries, have been a focus of regional meetings and bilateral talks.

This cluster of potentially oil-rich isles, reefs and rocky outcrops in the South China Sea has sometimes been a thorn in the relations among the claimants - Malaysia, China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam and Brunei.

Nearly all the claimants have at one time or another advocated that the issue is one that should be solved through discussions among themselves.

At the conclusion of the Asean Ministerial Meeting and Post Ministerial Conference (AMM/PMC) held in Singapore between July 20 and 28 this year, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said one of the significant outcomes of the talks was the consensus reached on the Spratlys dispute and the need to formulate a "Code of Conduct" for claimant States.

"This, we agreed, is exclusively an Asean issue. It is not for discussion at other international fora," he said, adding that the reported "tensions" in the area were being stirred by others outside the region.

So it was a big surprise when Philippine President Joseph Estrada announced on Tuesday that he had sought the help of US President Bill Clinton over the Spratlys issues.

Estrada, in an interview with the Manila radio station DZMM from Auckland where he attended the Apec forum, said: "I told him (Clinton) our problem in the South China Sea and he said he will not leave us alone.

"He said it would be best if we can settle it diplomatically, amicably, but if the worst comes to the worst, they are with us in case of any external aggression on our country. They will help defend us," he said.

Asked if the US statement would also apply in event of a Philippine conflict with China, Estrada said: "Whoever it is we get into conflict with, if there is intrusion into our territory, if there is external aggression, they are ready to defend our country. This does not refer to China only."

The statement by Estrada is unfortunate especially in view of the conciliatory moves that had been initiated by claimant nations in ensuring that the issue is solved amicably.

It is important to note that US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, despite objections by Asean and China, had during the Asean Regional Forum held after the AMM/PMC in Singapore raised the Spratlys issue.

She said the issue of the Spratlys was one of increasing concern to the US and added: "We cannot simply sit on the sidelines and watch.

"Nor can there be any doubt that this is an inappropriate forum for discussion of this issue."

The US decision to raise the issue is a direct violation of the wishes of Asean and China, which have been doggedly opposed to this, maintaining that the talks should only involve claimant States and not "outsiders".

But Albright dismissed this, saying that all members of the ARF had an interest in the issue, particularly in peace and stability in the South China Sea.

The close relations between Washington and Manila cannot be denied especially since the Philippines was once the colony of the US and the two countries have a mutual defence pact under which they agree to help each other in case of an external attack on the other.

But Manila's insistence on flying nearly every delegation of visiting US legislators to view the Spratlys "to have a first-hand look at the

situation and disprove accusations against us" is not only unnecessary but can be viewed as provocative.

If other claimants also decide to fly foreign delegations "to view" the Spratlys it would not only increase the air traffic in the region, but would contribute to heightening tensions among the claimants and neighbours.

Following accusations by Manila that Malaysia was putting up structures in two atolls in the Spratlys, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had explained that Kuala Lumpur had placed its scientists on Terumbu Siput and Terumbu Peninjau to carry out research and the atolls were well within Malaysian territory and the Exclusive Economic Zone.

Wisma Putra has said that both the reefs were located well within Malaysia's continental shelf boundaries as depicted in "our 1979 map and the Malaysian Exclusive Economic Zone".

The 1979 map was drawn in accordance with principles of international law and as such, Malaysia's ownership of the two atolls should not be disputed, the Foreign Ministry added.

Furthermore, Dr Mahathir had also insisted that there was no need for any middleman to resolve the overlapping claims on the Spratly Islands and when asked on the proposal by the US to become the "middleman", he said: "There's no need... we will settle the problems among ourselves."

China, too, has rejected an offer of US mediation in the territorial dispute and yet the Philippines seems to be bent on bringing Washington into the picture.

"Whispers" among the Asean diplomatic community have it that Manila may be considering putting up its own structures on a disputed atoll in the South China Sea.

In the event this is true, the recent rhetoric by Estrada and the highlighting of Manila's "closeness with the US" may be seen as a prelude to such an action.

However, in the spirit of Asean and the time-tested tradition of diplomacy it is hoped that claimant nations return to the negotiating table, without the overbearing presence of "outsiders" to solve the issue.

With the immense benefits that could be reaped through joint exploration of resources in some overlapping areas, the countries involved in the dispute should endeavour to focus on such bilateral arrangements at least in areas where quick solutions can be achieved.

Over the years there has been extensive work done by leaders and academicians under the auspices of Asean, which should be put to good use in bringing about an amicable solution to the issue.

Claimant nations should also refrain from making statements that would allow others in the international community to view the region as a possible "flashpoint" when in reality diplomacy and tolerance among the leaders have nurtured a spirit of co-operation and peace which has brought tremendous progress and prosperity to the people here.

(END)