

# BEIJING, MANILA FEUD OVER REEF

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China navy helicopter 'harassing' fishing boats near Spratlys, says Philippines

## BEIJING

CHINA on Monday said it had taken "control measures" against Philippine ships it accused of "illegally gathering" near a disputed reef in the South China Sea.

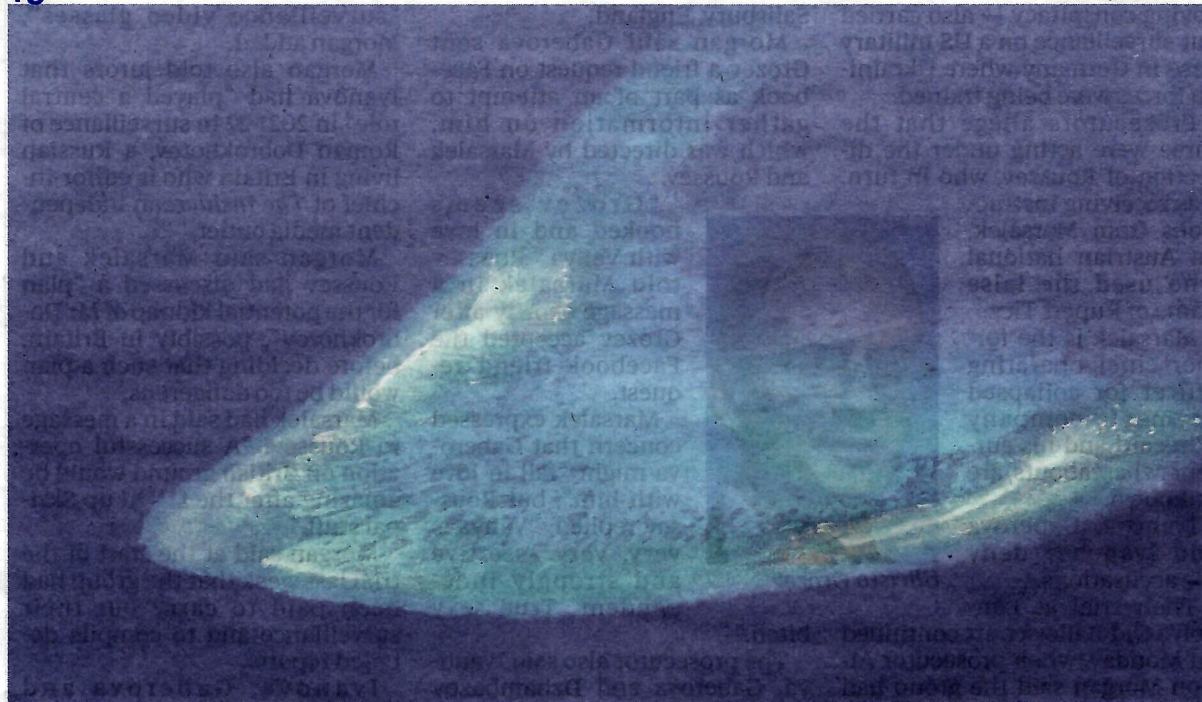
"Recently, several Philippine ships... illegally gathered under the pretence of fishing in the waters near Houteng Reef of China's Nansha Islands," China Coast Guard spokesman Liu Dejun said in a statement, using the Chinese names for the Iroquois Reef and Spratly Islands.

"The Chinese Coast Guard took necessary control measures against the Philippine ships in accordance with the law.

"We warn the Philippine side to immediately stop its infringements and provocations."

Meanwhile, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) said a Chinese navy helicopter with tail number 65 had "harassed" Philippine fishing vessels in Iroquois Reef.

The coast guard shared video footage taken by a Filipino fisherman on Nov 27 purportedly showing a helicopter hovering over a Philippine fishing boat.



An aerial view of Iroquois Reef in the South China Sea in March. AFP PIC

"As far as the coast guard is concerned, this is the first time we saw a PLA Navy helicopter harassing Filipino fishermen with such low altitude, 4.5m to 5.5m," Philippine Coast Guard spokesman on the South China Sea Commodore Jay Tarriela told reporters.

Tarriela said China's "harassment" prompted the PCG to deploy a 97m and 44m vessel in the area "to ensure the safety and security of Filipino fishermen exercising their right to fish freely in Rozul (Iroquois) Reef".

China claims almost all of the

South China Sea, despite an international ruling in 2016 concluding its claims have no legal basis.

Beijing has deployed navy, coast guard and so-called maritime militia forces — allegedly Chinese fishing vessels — in a bid to bar the Philippines from strategically important reefs and islands in the South China Sea.

Vessels from the two sides have clashed frequently in the past year, resulting in injuries and damages.

Tensions escalated in November when Philippine President

Ferdinand Marcos signed two laws defining the country's sea waters and imposing fixed lanes for foreign ships.

Tensions rose again when the United States and the Philippines signed a security agreement that allows the two sides to share classified information.

In Jakarta, Indonesian Foreign Minister, Sugiono said his country still does not recognise Beijing's claims in the South China Sea, seeking to dismiss concerns that a recent joint statement with China could jeopardise its sovereignty. **AFP**