

**PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE  
PRESIDENTIAL NEWS DESK**

**PRESIDENT FERDINAND R. MARCOS JR. AT THE KAPIHAN WITH THE MEDIA  
[Recorded in Melbourne, Australia | 6 March 2024]**

**Q:** Reaction to the collision between Philippine and Chinese Coast Guard vessels and the use of water cannons by the Chinese in the West Philippine Sea? Do you consider this as an attack that could trigger the MDT?

**PRESIDENT MARCOS:** I do not think that it is a time or the reason to invoke the Mutual Defense Treaty. However, we continue to view with great alarm this continuing dangerous maneuvers and dangerous actions that are being done against our seamen, our Coast Guard. And this time, they damaged the cargo ship and caused some injury to some of our seamen and I think that we cannot view this in any way but in the most serious way.

Once again, we will make our objections known and hope that we can continue to communicate to find a way so that such actions are no longer seen in the West Philippine Sea.

**Q:** What's your reaction to the reported sightings of Chinese research vessels in the Benham Rise?

**PRESIDENT MARCOS:** Once again, this is a clear intrusion into our Philippine maritime territory and it is, as usual, of great concern. And I see this as absolutely unnecessary because if it is truly a research vessel then we could have come to a very simple agreement that the research vessel will ply the waters and do the research that they need to do. However, there is a suspicion that they are not only research vessels so, again, this is a bit of an escalation of the tension that is present in the West Philippines Sea.

**Q:** What's your directive to the Agriculture Department following the Ombudsman's suspension of NFA officials involved in the alleged anomalous sale of NFA?

**PRESIDENT MARCOS:** The situation actually does not only involve the anomalous sale of NFA rice. It also is an examination of some of the procedures within the NFA that were undertaken without board approval, without the proper discussion within the NFA and with the DA and with the rest of the Cabinet. So, we have taken the safe measure of suspending all of those who have been shown to may have been involved in any of these wrongdoings such as the anomalous sale but also the cavalier way in which the procedures that have been set out in the rules have been ignored.

**Q:** Would the Philippines support inclusion of Australia into ASEAN? Anwar said he's open.

**PRESIDENT MARCOS:** Well, I cannot see why that would not be a good idea. Australia has already been a very active part of ASEAN. And for all intents and purposes, really, in all but name, they are already members of ASEAN. Yes, I think they would be very welcome to join ASEAN.

**Q:** On defense ties with Australia—you mentioned last year that you want joint military drills with Australia to continue. Canberra has committed to one every two years under IPE. Are there aspirations for the exercise to be a yearly thing and how would this benefit the Philippines?

**PRESIDENT MARCOS:** Well, the scheduling of this is really a risk, really depend upon the situation in the West Philippine Sea, whether or not the threat levels and the tension levels are increasing or decreasing. And as to having yearly exercises, well, that's probably something that we can discuss. But again, we will have to assess the situation at the time and if we need to continue these exercises, then I think we will be able to agree on that.

This will benefit the Philippines because we are conducting these exercises so that we are able to work together with our foreign partners. And when I say work together, it is not only for defense and security, it is also for disaster preparedness, disaster assistance that they might bring should there be a disaster such as Yolanda or Odette, once again, in the Philippines.

So, there are many benefits for us and I think that it is something that we should continue and should encourage.

**Q:** Napag-usapan po ba ang Status ng Visiting Forces Agreement, or SOVFA? Will this be looked into amid geopolitical tensions?

**PRESIDENT MARCOS:** Well, there's nothing to discuss. We spoke about it. Pero nandiyan ang slot--- nandiyan 'yung Visiting Forces agreement.

At dalawa lang ang bansa na mayroon tayong Visiting Forces Agreement, ang US at saka ang Australia.

Kaya't patuloy lang ang ating agreement sa kanila at patuloy lang ang ating usapan at siguro pagka may nangyari o may kailangan palitan saka natin babaguhin.

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