

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

**PRESS BRIEFING OF PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE (PCO) ASSISTANT
SECRETARY JOEY VILLARAMA WITH NATIONAL MARITIME COUNCIL SPOKESPERSON
VICE ADMIRAL ALEXANDER LOPEZ AND PRESIDENTIAL ASSISTANT ON MARITIME
CONCERNS ANDRES CENTINO
AUGUST 20, 2024 [11:10 A.M. – 11:29 A.M.]**

PCO ASEC. VILLARAMA: Magandang umaga, Malacañang Press Corps, at welcome sa ating press briefing ngayong Martes, August 20, 2024.

On August 6, President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. appointed former Department of Energy Undersecretary Alexander Lopez as spokesperson of the National Maritime Council or NMC. A graduate of the Philippine Military Academy, Mr. Lopez also served as a commander of the Western Command and Deputy Chief of Staff for Education and Training of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. He is now tasked to speak on behalf of the NMC on issues related to the West Philippine Sea.

To further introduce our new spokesperson, we have with us Presidential Assistant for Maritime Concerns, General Andres Centino. Good morning, gentlemen.

PRES'L. ASST. ON MARITIME CONCERNS CENTINO: Good morning everyone and thank you all for coming.

As mentioned earlier, the President has appointed a spokesperson of the National Maritime Council in the person of Vice Admiral Alexander Lopez. His designation to the position is in line with the directive to have a unified messaging on issues related to the West Philippine Sea.

Prior to his designation as the spokesperson, he has served for 38 years in the military service, culminating in his becoming the Commander of the Western Command which covers the West Philippine Sea and after his retirement from the military service, he continued to serve the government as undersecretary of the Department of Energy.

His designation authorizes him to speak on behalf of the National Maritime Council and without prejudice, of course, to the roles of the different spokespersons of the agencies under the National Maritime Council. And it is my role as directed by the Chair of the National Maritime Council to introduce to the public and to the media the designated spokesperson of the National Maritime Council, Vice Admiral Alexander Lopez.

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: Thank you very much, Secretary Centino. Magandang umaga sa ating lahat. Thank you, Secretary Centino for a very good introduction so I may not introduce myself anymore *[laughs]*. But nonetheless, I would like to take this opportunity to thank our President for giving me this, again, privilege in honor of serving our country – this time, in my capacity as the spokesperson of the National Maritime Council.

So, before I read our statement with regard to the incident of 19 August, allow me to mention that yesterday, the National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea reported to our public, of course,

stakeholders through a press statement detailing the factual details on what happened on 19 August.

So, the purpose of this press briefing is: One, we are talking at the level of the National Maritime Council policy level; two, we are echoing the report of the National Task Force; third, we are also conveying to our stakeholders, both external and internal, some other insights or inputs that would clear the air further what violations the Chinese Coast Guard did in that fateful morning; fourth, we would like to express the position of our government with regard to that particular incident; and lastly, it is also a basis for further actions of our government with regard to that incident.

So, with that as a backgrounder, let me now read the statement of the National Maritime Council on 19 August incident:

The Philippine Coast Guard using BRP Bagacay or MRRV-4410 and BRP Cape Engaño or MRRV-4411 conducted a regular and routine logistics mission in the West Philippine Sea in 18 August 2024. The early morning of 19 August, the Chinese Coast Guard vessels rammed and damaged the two Philippine Coast Guard vessels in the vicinity of Escoda Shoal. These unprofessional and dangerous actions of the Chinese Coast Guard vessels were in violation of international law including UNCLOS and the 1972 Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea or COLREGS.

These illegal actions do not contribute to confidence-building measures necessary for the improvement of relations on the basis of mutual respect and for a rules-based international order. Hence, the Philippines urges China to refrain from aggressive actions and adhere to international law.

The Philippines expresses serious concern over the deliberate harassment and infringement by China against the Philippines' sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea. The government remains committed to the President's directive for a diplomatic approach in a peaceful resolution of disputes.

The Philippines will continue to uphold its rights and jurisdictions in the West Philippine Sea, sustain our routine maritime activities and protect its territory and maritime zones from environmental degradation and other illegal activities.

So, that's our press statement. Thank you very much and good morning.

PCO ASEC. VILLARAMA: Thank you very much, Vice Admiral Lopez. We will now open the floor to questions from the media. Harley Valbuena, DZME.

HARLEY VALBUENA/DZME: Hello, good morning po. Vice Admiral, you said that the August 19 incident will be a basis for further action. So, what specific action are we talking about?

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: One of those actions that we are considering, as you all know, in any activities naman in the past, our Department of Foreign Affairs would probably file a diplomatic protest or note verbale – and this is seriously being studied by the Department of Foreign Affairs.

PCO ASEC. VILLARAMA: Anne Soberano of Bombo Radyo.

ANNE SOBERANO/BOMBO RADYO: Admiral Lopez, sir. Sir, tatlong beses na pong nagkaroon ng mga bayolenteng incident na ginagawa po ng China. Sir, puro na lang po ba tayo diplomatic? Wala po ba tayong gagawing tugon doon sa pagiging agresibo po ng mga Chinese Coast Guard laban sa mga barko ng Pilipinas? Thank you.

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: Well, in line with the President's directive 'no, kasi if we will be going beyond diplomatic or peaceful approach, you can just imagine 'no – maybe if you're referring to more kinetic actions, that will not be to the best interest of our country and of China, and even in the region. So, we're looking at this approach. We can never go wrong by using this diplomatic and peaceful approach and we are compliant 'no to the Code of Conduct that we have signed in 2002 that among others, parties will restraint 'no, will exercise restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or even escalate the dispute in the area among others.

PCO ASEC. VILLARAMA: Maricel Halili, TV-5.

MARICEL HALILI/TV-5: Sir, magandang umaga po. Sir, I understand there was a negotiation between the Philippines and China, I think it was last month, to ensure na magiging maayos iyong operation sa Ayungin Shoal pero nakita natin nangyari ito sa Escoda. So, what's your assessment with the negotiation? Do we still find it useful?

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: Definitely it is useful because of that understanding that we have with China, it's just a matter of—kasi iyong understanding din was focused on the RORE missions in Ayungin Shoal. We did not expect that this thing would happen between coast guards.

You know, the personality of the coast guards, part of their innate functions is safety of life and property at sea among others, right? And we just ano ... sila mismo iyong magpapatupad and yet, they are the ones who made these aggressive actions. So 'di ba, it's 180 degree, right, of what they are supposed to do and what we have done in the morning of 19 August.

MARICEL HALILI/TV5: So what's our plan?

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: Okay. Maybe that's one area where maybe the scope of the understanding between the two countries, baka – this has been seriously studied by our Department of Foreign Affairs – baka puwedeng ma-extend in other areas in our maritime domain.

MARICEL HALILI/TV5: Meaning, the whole West Philippine Sea iyong kasama doon sa EEZ natin, sir?

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: Yes, yes, maybe. Again, that's part of the study, whether it would merit coverage of maybe a bigger area or maybe the entire. So we leave it to the Department of Foreign Affairs because they're the principal agent in handling these things.

MARICEL HALILI/TV5: And one more thing, sir, kasi after the incident, naglabas din ng statement iyong China saying na Pilipinas na naman iyong may mali at tayo na naman iyong mayroong aggressive action. May we have your take on that?

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: Actually, the Philippine Coast Guard is just gathering all the pieces of evidence that would debunk the claim of China. And even 'di ba, nakita

ninyo, they showed a video, parang the intent of that is to tell the world na, 'Oh, kita mo, kami ang binangga ng Philippines.' But again, we'll just wait for all the documents, pictures and videos that the Philippine Coast Guard will release, maybe later on, showing otherwise. And it's just a matter of, you know, ang problema kasi ay what the coast guard vessels at the ground, the lies that their assets on the ground are issuing, pagdating sa taas ay kini-carry. Kung titingnan ninyo, halos parehong ano eh, parehong words, parehong statement.

But in contrary, we are very deliberate in coming up with factual details so that, you know, it's more of a responsibility to our public and to a broader extent, our international audience that this is really what happened, then let the public decide.

PRES'L. ASST. ON MARITIME CONCERNS CENTINO: And if I may add, the Coast Guard has been directed to gather all this evidence and the proper documentation for a possible filing of protest by the foreign affairs.

IVAN MAYRINA/GMA INTEGRATED NEWS: Vice Admiral Lopez, sir, in response to Harley's question, you said that further action would mean filing a diplomatic protest. But the President himself said last month that we should be doing more than just filing protest. Can you tell us what the President, perhaps, meant by doing more? Ano pa ho kaya iyong puwede nating gawin apart from filing diplomatic protests?

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: I really cannot second guess what the other action the President would like 'no kasi, again, it's with the Department of Foreign Affairs to recommend what other possible actions consistent with, you know, iyong sa diplomatic and peaceful approach. So basically, that would revolve into that ano lang thing.

IVAN MAYRINA/GMA INTEGRATED NEWS: On another point, as to your role as spokesperson for the National Maritime Council, where do you draw the line between your role and the role of the spokesperson for the National Task Force West Philippine Sea?

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: Yes, as Secretary Centino has mentioned a while ago, it's very clear that my role, I will be ... at the policy level, that's my role. So the spokespersons of the lower agencies will speak on their behalf, speak on their mandate. For example, if there is a spokesperson for the coast guard affairs in West Philippine Sea, he will just speak on matters of the coast guard activities in the West Philippine Sea. In like manner, kung AFP naman, they will speak on military defense matters on West Philippine Sea; and no policy matters will be discussed at their level kasi nasa level namin iyon 'no. Kasi sometimes, when things are being said inaccurately, so nagkakaroon ng ano 'di ba, hindi maganda sa pananaw at pandinig ng ating taumbayan and even to our legislator.

IVAN MAYRINA/GMA INTEGRATED NEWS: [OFF MIC] with our objective for unified messaging with regard to the West Philippine Sea?

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: Yeah, definitely.

MIKHAIL FLORES/REUTERS: Hi! Good morning. Admiral Lopez, what necessitated the appointment of a spokesperson at the National Maritime Council? Secretary Centino mentioned that there is a need for unified messaging, so what were the events prior or what were the precursors that triggered the appointment of a spokesperson at your level, at the policy level?

NMC SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL LOPEZ: My apologies, siguro that question will be ably answered by Secretary Centino because they are the ones who conceptualized this and they are the ones who came up with this order – appoint me. Maybe, I think, Secretary Centino will be the better person to answer that.

PRES'L. ASST. ON MARITIME CONCERNS CENTINO: You may recall that previously, after the second Maritime Council Meeting and there was a press conference, it was the chairman of the council, Secretary Bersamin, who spoke on behalf of the council. And succeeding statements were also given by the members of the council, and they saw it fit that the council should have its own spokesperson.

So in line with what I have said, 'a unified messaging in all matters of policy in regard to the issues in the West Philippine Sea', it is only fitting that a designated spokesperson will speak on behalf of the Maritime Council.

MIKHAIL FLORES/REUTERS: Sir, related to that, because if we look at the statement of ES Bersamin at that time, it caused a lot of confusion as to the statements that he made. So, I wonder if adding another voice to the West Philippine Sea could cause further confusion or is there a path towards, you know, you want unified messaging so is it on a path towards having just a single spokesperson on the West Philippine Sea matters down the line?

PRES'L. ASST. ON MARITIME CONCERNS CENTINO: When the council was created about three months ago, we didn't have any spokesperson for the council. We do have spokespersons from the other agencies. And with the instruction that the spokesperson will now speak on matters of policy, I see the wisdom of the council's guidance to have a designated spokesperson. And I would suppose that this will also address, perhaps, some shortfalls in the way we project the message to the public.

MIKHAIL FLORES/REUTERS: Sir, can you expound on the shortfalls, and how would the appointment of a National Maritime Council spokesperson address that?

PRES'L. ASST. ON MARITIME CONCERNS CENTINO: It would be clear that on matters of policy, it will be the spokesperson of the council. On operational level, the spokesperson of, let's say, the Armed Forces, the Coast Guard, shall continue to speak within their respective mandates. So I think that is where the delineation of the functions of the spokespersons.

MIKHAIL FLORES/REUTERS: Sir, last question on my end. How will the flow of information go? Because you mentioned that admiral officers speak at the policy level, but there are individual agencies that are part of the council. So can you just walk us through the information flow, also for our guidance and the public's awareness?

PRES'L. ASST. ON MARITIME CONCERNS CENTINO: As a matter of fact, the different departments, the heads of the different departments are also members of the council. So when the council convenes or meets, whatever is being discussed, it is being relayed to the spokesperson to speak on their behalf.

PCO ASEC. VILLARAMA: I'm afraid that's all the time we have. Vice Admiral Lopez will be available to the media in the coming days so we will be seeing more of him.

So, thank you to General Centino and Vice Admiral Lopez. That concludes our press briefing this Tuesday. Thank you, Malacañang Press Corps. Magandang umaga sa inyong lahat.

###