PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

MALACAÑANG INSIDER HOSTED BY PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE DIRECTOR CRIS VILLONCO WITH NATIONAL MARITIME COUNCIL SPOKESPERSON VICE ADMIRAL ALEXANDER LOPEZ
AUGUST 28, 2024 [11:00 A.M. – 11:27 A.M.]

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Current developments, presidential directives, accurate and reliable updates straight from the Palace. Sitting in for Daphne Oseña-Paez, this is Cris Villonco for Malacañang Insider.

Protecting and upholding the Philippines' sovereignty and its territory, these are the commitments of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. since his very first day of serving as the leader of the Philippines. Through the implementation of strategic policies, programs and initiatives, his goal is to strengthen the maritime security and raise awareness on the maritime domain.

We have with us today, National Maritime Council Spokesperson Vice Admiral Alexander Lopez. Good morning, sir, on this rainy morning. Thank you for coming to Malacañang Insider.

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Thank you also, Ms. Cris, and for having me here and good morning to all our televiewers.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. So, are you ready? Let's get to it.

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Yes.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. Last March 2024, nilagdaan ni Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr. ang Executive Order No. 57 kung saan naglalayon ito na i-rename and reorganize ang National Coast Watch Council into National Maritime Council. Ano po ba iyong pangangailangan ng ating bansa upang humantong dito? Sinu-sino po ba iyong mga bumubuo rito?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Okay. Gusto ko sanang sagutin iyong tanong mo, Ms. Cris 'no, by giving a short backgrounder and context para mas maintindihan ng ating elite televiewers. Ang Pilipinas kasi ay pangalawa sa pinakamalaking arkipelago sa buong mundo, second lang tayo sa Indonesia. So, napakalawak ng ating karagatan, napakahaba ng ating coastline. Ikukumpara natin ang lupa sa dagat, mayroon tayong ratio na 1-is-to-7 – meaning, isang kilometro kuwadrado ng lupa ay mayroong kaakibat na pitong kilometro kuwadradong karagatan. So, all in all, to include the territorial seas and the EEZ, we have 2.2 million square kilometers of water as against the 300,000 square kilometers of land.

So, with that as a backdrop, makikita natin gaano kalaki iyong ating karagatan at maraming nangyayari doon ano. Because of that, nagiging porous ang ating border – maraming lagusan, maraming papasukan. A lot of activities happened there like piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal traffic of weapons of mass destruction, illegal traffic of people, illegal… lahat ng illegal—

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Of course, our resources.

VADM. ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Precisely. So, you could just imagine the burden of our government. So, with that as a backdrop, all concerned agencies sometimes mayroon silang complementing programs and sometimes into a certain extent, nag-o-overlap. So, that's where the government, then in 2011 during the time of the late President Noynoy Aquino III, he came up with that EO57, Series of 2011 – getting all these agencies together for a more coordinated, synchronized approach to address those maritime challenges. So, you could just imagine 2011 iyon.

And then in 2014/2015, doon naman nakita natin iyong kalagayan sa West Philippine Sea umiigting 'no because nagpalabas iyong bansang Tsina noong kanilang illegal Nine-Dash Line 'no. Walang historical basis iyon and yet, naging basehan nila ito para magdagdag ng mga watercraft nila, navy nila, ng coast guard nila, ang kanilang maritime militia tinataboy ang ating mga mangingisda, hindi na tayo makapag… iyong normal regular patrols natin.

So, with that, nag-decide din ang gobyerno na through Memorandum Circular No. 94 of 2016 establishing the national coast watch system at ito ay nagbigay din ng awtoridad para i-establish iyong National Coast Watch Council. Ang bumubuo nito like the Department of National Defense, DENR, DOE and all other government agencies that have activities, program activities doon sa ating maritime domain.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So, basically, all the concerned agencies and department stakeholders have a say in whatever is going to be decided.

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Yes, and this National Task Force in the West Philippine Sea ay reporting directly to the President and it was headed then and still now is by the National Security Adviser, so mayroon tayong National Coast Watch Council, mayroon tayong NTF-WPS.

Now, here comes our administration led by our President, nakita nila parang may duplication yata ano. So, nilagay nila… out of their study, napag-aralan at ang result ng kanilang pag-aaral ay dapat siguro ilagay na iyong National Task Force under the Maritime Council kaya nag-issue naman ngayon ng EO57 [series] of 2024, kumbaga renaming the National Coast Watch Council into the National Maritime Council. And this time, the National Task Force-West Philippine Sea is under the National Maritime Council.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay, sir. So, considering that there are so many stakeholders in this and so many concerns as you were saying, ano po iyong mga primary directives ngayon considering ang daming kailangang i-address?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Yeah. Unang-una 'no, kaya nga ginather (gathered) lahat itong mga agencies na ito towards a more coordinated, deliberate and synchronized and cohesive approach to address these maritime challenges hindi lang sa West Philippine Sea actually, kaya nga national, national in scope na, national scope. Unlike iyong Task Force West Philippine Sea, nakatuon lang ito doon sa West Philippine Sea area. But because of this national in scope of the council, lahat na ng karagatan ng buong Pilipinas ay sakop niya.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. That's a lot to take on, sir. Well, okay, so let's get into… let's be a little bit informal in this discussion. So, as the newly appointed spokesperson of NMC, what did you feel? Ano po iyong naramdaman ninyo when you were offered this position by the President?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Honestly, Cris, I was surprised 'no. I was surprised. While it is true, I was a former commander then – iyong engagement with the media and everything, I do it through my spokesperson then. And now, I'm the one speaking here *[laughter]*.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Yes. Oh, you're doing a great job! *[laughs]*.

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Yeah. That, I would like to publicly appreciate and thank our President because serving in government is a privilege and an honor. So, I'll get to again serve our maritime, country and our people – this time in my capacity as the spokesperson of the National Maritime Council. And, I thank the President, thank you very much boss.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Oh, and thank you for taking on this job. Well, what would you say, sir, would be the biggest challenge na hinaharap ng National Maritime Council ngayon?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Ngayon kasi, ang bilis ng ano eh 'no… unlike before, medyo highly manageable eh. Pero ngayon, ang bilis ng pangyayari 'no.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Yes.

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Kaya nga, ngayon lang within a week, several incidents happened 'no. So, that is now challenge of the council to get all these information so fast and accurate kasi otherwise, iyong… alam mo naman iyong bansang Tsina, they twist the details 'no. They would like to portray na tayo ang palaging may kasalanan. Actually, we are on the moral ground. We release factual information so that our people will understand, they will know what's happening and they will also understand why these are the actions being taken by our government.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. Well, to add to this, to what we were just talking about just now, this August 19 nagkaroon muli ng insidente sa pagitan ng barko ng China at ng Pilipinas. Maaari po ba nating ikuwento sa mga manunood natin kung paano po ba ito nangyari? Bakit po ba humantong sa girian iyong dalawang barko?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Okay. Actually, nakapagpahayag na iyong National Task Force on West Philippine Sea 'no but ikukuwento ko na rin. On August 18, iyong dalawang barko ng Philippine Coast Guard ay nagpalaot para sa kaniyang normal ano, we call it the normal logistics run as providing or sending food, provisions, water, medicines to iyong kanilang mga personnel station, sa mga substations nila in Patag, in Lawa and even in the Pag-asa Island.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So, iba pa ito sa RoRe or is it also..?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Basically, it's the…they have their own RoRe kasi sa AFP din may RoRe pero basically its' the same resupply missions, this time being undertaken by the Philippine Coast Guard.

So, iyong malapit na sa Escoda or Sabina Shoal mayroong humarang na mga coast guard vessels – siguro, na-monitor nila, they have that capability to monitor anyway. So, nakita nila hinarang 'no at dumikit sila and they did aggressive movements at humantong ito sa pagbunggo, pag-ram 'no – iba iyong bunggo sa ramming eh – kapag ramming talagang mayroon nang intensiyon eh, may [unclear] intention 'no.

Itong dalawang barko natin ng coast guard iyong in the morning of 19 August, they incurred damages, may nabutas. At iyon ang masaklap doon dahil they disrupted a routine mission of providing food, supplies, medicine to our people in Patag and in Lawa.

So, in short, nabunggo nga 'no, because of that hindi na natuloy iyong…momentarily hindi natuloy pero nagpalaot pa rin kasi seaworthy pa naman kahit na may butas iyong isang barko natin ay nakapaglayag pa rin sila. Kasi ang akala kasi ng Chinese Coast Guard doon sa BRP Teresa Magbanua hihinto pero hindi dadaanan lang talaga iyon. So, nonetheless, noong nakita nilang wala naman pala talagang intensiyon na pumunta doon sa isang barko natin na na-station doon sa Sabina, they let the two coast guard vessels proceed with their mission.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So, wala naman pong nasaktan?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Wala, pero of course state of shock – mga gamit nasira, tapos iyong makina kasi may water cannoning pang ginawa so these are the things that the Chinese Coast Guard are doing.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. Well, so in connection sa nangyaring insidente sa Escoda Shoal, naglabas ng statement ang China na ang Pilipinas daw ang bumangga sa kanilang barko at pumasok ang ating barko sa kanilang teritoryo nang walang permiso. What you have to say about that?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Let us put this in the very clear terms. Ang Escoda Shoal is 75 nautical miles from the main island of Palawan. Mayroon tayong tinatawag na 200 exclusive economic zone under the provision of UNCLOS. So, nakikita natin na pasok na pasok iyong Escoda Shoal doon sa provision na 200 exclusive economic zone. In contrast, doon sa China, kasi ang pinakamalapit na probinsiya ng China is Hainan – that's more than 500 nautical miles away. So, dapat tayo iyong, "Oh, ano iyong ginagawa ninyo dito? Illegal kayo. Ang presence ninyo rito ay illegal. At iyong ginagawa ninyong aggressive ay clear violations of the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea." Coast Guard sila and yet dapat nga sila ang nag-i-implement and yet sila iyong…the irony of it 'no, sila iyong nagsasagawa nitong mga dangerous and life-threatening activities.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So, do you think, sir, that there has to be an official statement about this or is it something that there are times you decide which ones to let go and which ones to actually addressed?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: No. Actually, Ms. Cris, nakapagpadala na tayo ng statement of serious concern sa embahada ng Tsina dito sa Pilipinas, at the same time nakapagpadala rin tayo to our embassy in Beijing expressing our serious concern on this event that happened.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. So, may isa pang pahayag muli iyong inilabas ng coast guard ng Tsina na iniligtas lamang daw nila umano ang mga tauhan ng Pilipinas na nahulog sa dagat pagkatapos nang banggaan ng Pilipinas at ng China. What do you have to say about this once again?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Well, narrative nila iyon eh pero according to our reports, walang nangyaring ganoon. Siguro, gusto lang nilang ipakita na they are still you know humanitarian mode, saving people but walang ganoong nangyari. Walang ganoong nangyari, purong kasinungalingan, unfortunately.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Well. Up next let's move on to our next topics that we can discuss. Anong mga hakbang ang ginagawa ng National Maritime Council upang mapanatili ang kapayapaan at kaligtasan ng mga kababayan natin sa West Philippine Sea sa patuloy na nagaganap na girian sa pagitan ng China at Pilipinas? We will be right back.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Welcome back. You're still watching Malacañang Insider with Spokesperson Vice Admiral Alexander Lopez. So, we will go back pa po pala. We are not done from the last topic that we discussed.

Mayroon po ba tayong hard evidence katulad ng videos or photos na sumusuporta sa pahayag na ito ng China?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Yeah. Oo, mayroon tayong evidence. The coast guard is just compiling all these evidence. Kung napapanood ninyo sa TV, nagpalabas sila in grey eh 'no, pero they took it at an angle na lumalabas na tayo iyong bumangga 'no. So, they are very adept on those things 'no strategy nila iyon pero kung titingnan mo papaanong tayo ang bumangga eh mas maliit tayo 'no so it doesn't make sense 'no – mas maliit, babanggain iyong mas malaki tapos mayroon tayong bangga sa kaliwa, may bangga tayo sa kanan, iyong isang barko ganoon din. So, it doesn't make sense na tayo iyong babangga para mabutas tayo. So, it's not really…

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So, physical evidence alone show that it seems to be impossible.

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Yes, definitely.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. But pero, Usec, doon po sa sunud-sunod na insidente sa West Philippine, paano po ba nakakaapekto ito sa mga relasyon natin sa Pilipinas at ng China?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Actually, the West Philippine Sea issue is not the be-all and end-all of our relationship with China. So, nagkataon lang talaga na ito iyong nagiging focus but I believe our government is doing very well in managing this conflict with China 'no.

So, sabihin nating isolated case ito pero nakakanginig, nakakagalit 'no, but nonetheless sabi ko nga kanina it's not be-all and end-all relationship with China.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. So, bago pa man maganap ang insidente sa Escoda Shoal nitong August 19, noong nakaraang buwan lamang ay nagkaroon ng provisional understanding ang China at ang Pilipinas. Ano po ba ang nakapaloob dito?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Okay. Iyong provisional understanding actually ito ay ginawa ng ating Department of Foreign Affairs 'no. I just could not delve into the details because that is the purview of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

So, what we do in the NMC, the members, is we give technical information to the Department of Foreign Affairs so that they will be able to negotiate well with China. The principle behind the provisional understanding is, deescalating the tension every time we do rotation and resupply missions at Ayungin.

By the way, provisional understanding is just focus on the resupply mission in Ayungin. So iyon lang, doon lang talaga ang scope niyon.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So all other shoals, all other..?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: None, doon lang talaga para walang mangyaring insidente katulad ng nangyayari before na may nasaktan tayo. So hopefully with those deliberate communications between and among our foreign personnel, Philippines and China, they came up with that understanding.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Well, makakaapekto po ba ito, iyong nangyaring insidente sa Escoda Shoal sa existing provisional understanding ng Pilipinas at ng China? Is there any possibility that it will include the other shoals or all the other affected areas?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Yeah, actually that was our hope, that the understanding that we have in the Ayungin RoRe Mission will somehow apply, pero hindi ganoon ang nangyari. So, we are still hoping that walang magiging pagkakaiba or effect doon sa understanding on that particular RoRe Mission Ayungin. And hoping siguro, that's now an angle that the Department of Foreign Affairs will look at, how the understanding coverage can be extended to maybe Escoda and other parts of the West Philippine Sea.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay, so pag-usapan naman po natin iyong directives ng Pangulo tungkol sa paggamit ng diplomatic approach bilang solusyon sa agresibong actions ng China, bakit po ito mahalaga?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Klarong-klaro kasi doon sa SONA ng ating Pangulo, nasabi na nga niya na diplomatic channels and mechanisms ang gagamitin lang natin to resolve this disputes, and I really believe in that kasi we will never go wrong if we pursue the peaceful track in settling disputes among nations actually. And itong diplomatic approach, hindi lang naman nakatuon ito sa diplomatic protest eh, there are other ways and the DFA, sila ang experts doon. Maybe things like engaging our allies – our traditional allies, new found allies and like-minded nations – opening up our communications especially with China and that happened actually when we came with that provisional understanding, they opened the communication channel, they were able to talk and engaging other countries t0 be sympathetic to us, these are the things. So, these are the tools, nasa arsenal ng foreign affairs and so, we cannot second-guess what the foreign affairs, of course with the approval of the President, will do.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So, in connection to that, wo with regards to diplomatic protest, nasa anong step na po ba tayo?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: How I wish, I can answer that, Miss Cris, kasi that's, again, the purview of the Department of Foreign Affairs. As I mentioned a while ago, members of the NMC will come up with technical information so that the DFA can study, they will know what violations have been committed and the correct solution to the problem.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Pero hanggang saan po ba iyong limitasyon ng Pilipinas sa pagpu-push through ng diplomatic approach?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Again, as to the limits, we defer to the DFA.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Yes, we defer to your technical information through the DFA and their implementation.

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Kasi it's not that simple eh.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay, so nabanggit din ng Pangulo na we should be doing more than diplomatic protest. And ano po ba iyong mga specific na hakbang na maaaring gawin natin for this?

VADM ALEXANDER LOPEZ: As I mentioned, leveraging with our allies, coming up with open communications, that is part of the NMC. Pero maganda, hindi lang iyong katulad ng, for example the Department of Agriculture, specifically the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, for the affected fisherman. And mayroon din iyong part ang Department Environment and Natural Resources, they also have those programs. So, hindi lang doon sa diplomatic approach na nakatuon, na ang principal player dito ay ang Department of Foreign Affairs.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. So in connection sa mga nararamdaman na tensiyon ng mga Pilipino sa security sa West Philippine Sea, ano po ba iyong puwede nating ibigay na mensahe sa ating mga kababayan lalung-lalo na po sa ating mga mangingisdang direktang naapektuhan nito?

VAdm ALEXANDER LOPEZ: Para sa ating mga kababayan, huwag po kayong mabahala dahil klarung-klaro po ang posisyon ng ating Pangulo, ng ating gobyerno that we will not abandoned even a square inch of our territory to a foreign power. And we will exhaust all peaceful approaches, diplomatic channels, mechanisms so that these disputes will be settled in a professional, peaceful and orderly manner.

Kasi again, walang nananalo kung darating tayo doon sa sitwasyon na magkakaputukan, war and everything. So, we leave to the wisdom of President. We believe, really behind the flag that we will go to that peaceful track of resolving disputes, international disputes.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Thank you for joining us, Spokesperson Vice Admiral Alexander Lopez.

VAdm ALEXANDER LOPEZ: My pleasure, Miss Cris.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Thank you.

Pagpapataas ng kamalayan ng mga Pilipino sa kalagayan ng ating bansa at pagpapatibay ng seguridad ng ating soberanya para sa bawat isa nating kababayan. Ito ang hangarin ng pamahalaan upang tiyakin na ang ating bansa ay magkaroon ng progreso sa misyon nitong bigyan ang bawat isang Pilipino ng mas ligtas at mapayapang Bagong Pilipinas.

We bring you in-depth views of the latest issues and regular Palace updates. Sitting in for Daphne Oseña-Paez, this is Cris Villonco for Malacañang Insider. Have a good day.

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