

Will not allow any country to set up military base: Maldives to India

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New Delhi: Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen has assured Prime Minister Narendra Modi that his country will not allow any foreign power to set up a military base under the new law allowing foreign ownership of land, allaying India's concerns over possible expansion of Chinese strategic assets in the archipelago.

Yameen, in a letter to Modi, also assured his government will keep the Indian Ocean a "demilitarized zone", official sources said.

"Maldivian President has assured Prime Minister Modi that no country can set up a military base in Maldives and that it will be a demilitarized Indian Ocean," government sources said.

Yameen's letter was handed over to external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj by Maldivian foreign secretary Ali Naseer Mohamed, who left on Saturday after a two-day visit here.

The letter of assurance came after India conveyed its concerns over the impact of the recently passed constitutional amendment which allowed foreigners to own land in the island nation. It is understood that the concerns were conveyed by foreign secretary S Jaishankar who was in Maldives last week.

The new law passed by the 85-member Majlis, will allow foreigners who invest more than USD 1 bn to purchase land within the project site in which at least 70 per cent of the area of the completed project must be reclaimed land.

Earlier, Maldives' Constitution only allowed long-term leasing of land which could be up to 99 years.

The development created a flutter among the officials here who felt the new law could enable China to set up bases in the Maldives, thereby giving a strategic advantage to Beijing over New Delhi.

However, the Maldivian officials defended the decision as one that will attract offshore investors to special economic zones set up by President Yameen to reduce the economy's dependence on tourism.

Yameen also reiterated his invitation to Modi to visit Maldives, which he had skipped in March this year when he visited other maritime neighbours-Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka. It was seen by many as a reflection of the widening diplomatic chasm between India and Maldives, which was witnessing political unrest over the arrest of former President Mohammed Nasheed.

- PTI