

Maldives crisis: China opposes UN mediation, calls for promoting dialogue between parties to end

08/02/2018 09:09 by admin

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File pic of Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang

Beijing: China today opposed any UN mediation in the Maldives but called on the international community to provide "support and convenience" to the relevant parties to facilitate dialogue and resolve the country's political crisis.

Ahead of the UN Security Council meeting today to discuss the situation in the Maldives after UN officials offered to facilitate all-party talks to resolve the situation, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told media here that China is for supporting relevant parties in the island nation to resolve the crisis.

Asked whether China is averse to UN mediation in the Maldives, Geng said, "I made myself clear. The international community should respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Maldives and provide support and convenience for dialogue between the relevant parties and play a constructive role in this aspect."

The Chinese stand to provide outside support for the parties is seen as a slight change in Beijing's position.

Opposition parties in the Maldives allege China is backing President Abdulla Yameen who has permitted several high-profile Chinese-backed infrastructure projects and signed a controversial Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China despite domestic opposition.

Geng's comments came as Yameen dispatched special envoys to "friendly countries" like China, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The special envoy for China is expected to arrive here later today.

Geng said, "China thinks that the current situation and disputes in the Maldives belong to its internal affairs. It should be properly resolved through consultations by relevant parties. The international community should respect the Maldives' sovereignty and territorial integrity and play a constructive role for dialogue between the relevant parties."

China, he said is willing to maintain close communication with relevant parties in Maldives to restore normal order as soon as possible.

Asked whether it means China is in touch with former president Mohamed Nasheed who is bitterly critical of China's role in the Maldives, Geng said, "We are maintaining close communication with relevant parties in the Maldives and the diplomatic channels between two countries is also smooth."

But at the same time, Geng refuted allegations by Sri Lanka-based Nasheed who has accused China of land grab and undermining the Maldives' sovereignty and security in the Indo-Pacific. Nasheed also called for Indian military intervention to end the crisis.

Yesterday, Geng said China is opposed to any outside military intervention in Maldives in response to Nasheed's call.

"I think that kind of remarks (by Nasheed) is totally wrong. When Nasheed was president China has offered assistance to Maldives and promoted pragmatic cooperation and has achieved a lot of outcomes. I don't know whether Nasheed

will regard such cooperation as grabbing," he said.

Based on mutual respect and equality, the Maldives has maintained cooperation on infrastructure and livelihood projects and China has made contribution to the transformation of economic structure and improvement of livelihoods of people of the Maldives, Geng said while defending China's massive investments in the picturesque islands in the Indian Ocean.

"China has not attached political strings for cooperation with the Maldives. China will never endanger the independence of the Maldives. Friendly cooperation is for all the people in the Maldives and it serves the interest of the two countries and two peoples," he said.

Besides India, the US, the UN, and the EU have all expressed concern over Yameen jailing the Supreme Court judges and 81-year-old former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom besides a number of opposition legislators.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday urged the Maldives government to uphold the rule of law and ensure the safety of the people of the island nation.

The UN chief expressed serious concern about the unfolding situation in the Maldives and, in a statement issued by his spokesman Stephane Dujarric, urged the government to uphold the Constitution and the rule of law, lift the state of emergency as soon as possible, and take all measures to ensure the safety and security of the people in the country.

China views the Maldives as key to its Maritime Silk Road project in the Indian Ocean as it has already acquired Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.

Also China today further strengthened its travel advisory to thousands of Chinese tourists by asking travel agencies not to organise group tours to the Maldives during the week-long Chinese New Year holiday this month.

Geng in his briefing referred to the China Travel Bureau's warnings to travel agencies about group tours. Earlier, China had asked its tourists to cancel plans to visit the Maldives which is a favourite tourist destination. Tourism is the Maldives' biggest industry. It accounts for around a fifth of its GDP and generates billions of dollars every year in revenue. In 2016, the sector was worth almost USD 9 billion.

About 1.4 million people visited the Indian Ocean archipelago last year, of which Chinese tourists constituted about 30 per cent. The Chinese New Year was stated to be biggest season for tourists from China to visit the Maldives.

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