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Fiji offers talks on ownership of Minerva Reefs

MICHAEL FIELD Last updated 08:36 15/06/2011

Fiji says it is willing to amicably resolve its dispute with Tonga over who owns the Minerva Reefs, 1500 kilometres north of New Zealand.

Both countries claim the unoccupied reefs with Fiji destroying a Tongan maritime beacon on the reefs.

Last week the Tongan Navy claimed it had chased away a Fiji Navy ship at the reefs and had re-installed a new beacon.

In a statement today Fiji said it reiterates that Minerva is within Fiji's territorial waters and any challenge to this widely accepted Fijian territorial maritime boundary must be directed to the United Nations dispute resolution mechanism in the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea.

"The Minerva Reef falls within the legal and internationally recognised border of Fiji."

They say the Fiji claim has been "endorsed through acquiescence by all Pacific Island countries over the years through acceptance of regional maritime maps issued by regional organizations...."

It says Fiji's boundaries and exclusive economic zone has not changed from the one registered with the UN three decades ago.

"Any attempt to dispute this must be directed to the relevant international and legal bodies," Fiji says.

"The Government of Fiji wishes to advise that it will meet with any claimant to any of its maritime boundaries to amicably resolve any dispute, failing which it will pursue all legal actions available under the United Nations legal framework."

On Monday, Tonga upped the tension by releasing a photo of a new beacon it has erected at an atoll Fiji also claims and announcing it is building a second one.

Tongan Chief Secretary Busby Kautoke said Tonga was "standing firm" over its claim to what it calls Teleki Tokelau and Teleki Tonga (north and south Teleki).

"The Government of Tonga's immediate concern is motivated by the real danger to international shipping by the destruction of navigational beacons, albeit by an act of vandalism, placed there by the Tongan authorities and duly marked on the charts."

Mr Kautoke said Tonga had advised the International Maritime Organisation of the new white light at Minerva.

"This operation was done in order that persons traversing Teleki Tokelau may travel safely and without impediment."

He said a second beacon was also being built on the atoll, to replace another one "also destroyed by the Fijian military junta".

Tonga has warned that if Fiji tries to remove the new beacons, it will be regarded as an "act of aggression".

- Stuff