

Disputed Islands to Get Arms

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The Defense Ministry will start sending new weapons to a chain of islands claimed by both Russia and Japan later this year and complete building two military posts there in 2012, General Nikolai Makarov, chief of the armed forces General Staff, said Wednesday.

The announcement that Russia is pushing ahead with plans to send missiles and other artillery to the windswept archipelago known as the southern Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan threatens to end a brief calm in a war of words between the two countries after a March earthquake in Japan.

"The Defense Ministry's plan for the Kurils has been approved," Makarov said, Interfax reported.

"In the second half of this year we will begin erecting two military posts, the construction of which will be completed next year," he said.

Russia already maintains an artillery base on one of the islands, although analysts say its equipment is badly outdated. The new weapons will be sent to the islands starting this year.

Soviet troops occupied the four islands off Japan's Hokkaido at the end of World War II, and they have remained in Moscow's hands, preventing the two countries signing a peace treaty officially ending the war.

President Dmitry Medvedev caused a storm in November when he became the first president to visit the remote islands off Russia's Pacific coast, promising increased federal investment.

Medvedev later said Russia must deploy modern weaponry to ensure the islands' security, and a visit in February by Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov rekindled Tokyo's anger. Japan has said it is closely watching the plans for increased military activity.

Tensions eased in March after the devastating earthquake and tsunami struck Japan, killing thousands of people and diverting the attention of both Tokyo and Moscow away from the islands. Russia sent emergency workers to Japan to assist in the aftermath of the disaster, and analysts said the isle dispute, which some see as a Kremlin-inspired stunt aimed at boosting Medvedev's political position, could take a back seat to improved relations.

But Makarov's comments on Wednesday threaten to rekindle anger in Japan.

Makarov said improving weaponry on the islands would be completed within three to four years, Interfax reported. Among the weapons to be sent to the islands is the Russian Bastion anti-ship missile system, he said.

(Reuters, MT)

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