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# Japan Regrets Weapons Plan for Isles

March 02, 2011




TOKYO — Japan's top government spokesman called Russia's move to fortify its military presence on disputed islands "very regrettable" on Wednesday, the latest in a series of diplomatic tit-for-tat exchanges over the western Pacific isles that both sides claim.

The comment by Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano follows an Interfax report on Tuesday citing the military General Staff as saying Russia would arm the sparsely populated islands with anti-ship missiles and attack helicopters.

"A Russian military buildup on the northern islands runs counter to our position and is very regrettable," Edano said at a regular news conference.

But Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov denied a military buildup on the disputed islands, Kyodo news agency said.

Denisov told his Japanese counterpart, Kenichiro Sasae, that the planned military realignment was aimed at cutting armed personnel through modernization of equipment, Kyodo said, quoting unidentified Japanese government officials.

Sovereignty over the windswept islands, called the Northern Territories in Japan and the southern Kurils in Russia, has been a constant irritant in bilateral ties since Soviet troops took them over at the end of World War II.

Russian-Japanese relations sharply deteriorated after President Dmitry Medvedev visited one of the islands in November, the first visit by a Kremlin leader.

Ties sank further last month when Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan called the trip an "unforgivable outrage."

Denisov was in Tokyo to hold a strategic dialogue with Sasae, the first such talks in more than a year.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said they discussed bilateral relations, and the world situation including nuclear proliferation in the context of the Korean Peninsula.

Statements from both governments on the dialogue did not make any specific mention of the disputed islands or Russian military plans.

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