

East Timor concerned over Indonesian military exercise: official

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

Thursday, Jan 15, 2:44am ET

JAKARTA (AFP) - East Timor (news - web sites) has expressed concern after Indonesian troops fired on an uninhabited island whose ownership has not yet been determined, a senior East Timor foreign ministry official said.

Nelson Santos, foreign ministry secretary general, told AFP he sent a letter at the beginning of January to his Indonesian counterpart over the December 14 incident on Fatu Sinai, known in Indonesian as Pulau Batek.

“We just want to convey our concern,” Santos said.

“They expressed regret that they did not inform (us) in advance,” he said.

“I would not say that it is a problem,” Santos added.

Ownership of the uninhabited rocky island, about the size of a football field, is “not in dispute” because its status has not yet been discussed, Santos said.

However, he added that East Timor wants talks on the status of the outcrop to be held after the land border between the two countries is settled.

East Timor gained independence in May 2002 after 31 months of United Nations (news—web sites) stewardship that followed a bloody 1999 vote for independence from Indonesia, which invaded the former Portuguese colony in 1975.

The outcrop is about eight kilometres (five miles) off the western edge of Oecussi, an East Timorese enclave surrounded by Indonesian West Timor.

Indonesia's foreign ministry says there is no question about who has sovereignty over the outcrop.

“The sovereign government of Timor Leste, time and again, has said it is not a disputed island,” Indonesian foreign ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa told AFP.

“There is no multiple or dual claim to the island of Batek and to say otherwise doesn't have any truth whatsoever.”

Indonesian naval spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Guntur Wahyudi had a different perspective.

“After they separated, they claimed it,” he said from the eastern city Surabaya. “For the moment, we don't accept it because we don't know what the basis for it is.”

Wahyudi said that on December 14 about 11 naval personnel including frogmen were deployed to the island for rifle training using rubber bullets. He said that as far as he knew no heavy weapons were used.

Santos said reports from military observers, officials and residents on the Oecussi mainland said “they fired toward the island” where Indonesia has built a lighthouse.