

Vietnam Tells China to Remove Oil Rig From Disputed Waters

Previous placement of rig HYSY 981 sparked riots in Vietnam

By Vu Trong Khanh

HANOI — Vietnam's government on Thursday said it had told China to pull an oil rig from waters between the two countries that haven't been demarcated and urged Beijing not to drill for oil or gas in the area.

China National Offshore Oil Corp. towed the rig, known as HYSY 981, into a disputed area of the South China Sea in May 2014, triggering an uproar in Vietnam. Anti-Chinese riots broke out in several parts of the country while Chinese and Vietnamese coast-guard and fishing vessels stood off against each other at sea.

In a statement on Vietnam's government website, foreign ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh said China last pulled the rig to its present location in the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin on Sunday. It was towed to a nearby location in January.

"Vietnam strongly protests this and demands that China drop its drilling plans and move it out of the area," Mr. Binh said. He said Vietnam had lodged an official protest with China's embassy in Hanoi.

In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei told a news briefing on Friday that the "operation is in undisputed Chinese waters and it is a normal, commercial exploration. We hope relevant countries would take an objective and reasonable view on this."

This latest spat comes as relations between the two countries are deteriorating again. Vietnamese authorities last week seized a Chinese ship they said had illegally entered Vietnamese waters carrying 100,000 liters of diesel fuel. State media in Hanoi reported the captain of the three-man vessel as saying the boat was supplying oil to Chinese fishing boats in the area.

It also comes as Vietnam completes its new leadership lineup.

The country's legislature on Thursday formally elected Nguyen Xuan Phuc as prime minister, replacing Nguyen Tan Dung, an outspoken and popular critic of China's military and commercial expansion in the South China Sea in recent years.

Mr. Phuc joins State President Tran Dai Quang and Communist Party Secretary-General Nguyen Phu Trong, who has grown more critical of China's role in the region, as the third of the country's top leaders