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Japan's Diplomatic Tensions With China and South Korea Intensify Over Disputed Islands

This is IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English.

Japan is at the center of separate diplomatic crises with China and South Korea over two groups of disputed islands. The long-standing disputes intensified recently as countries in the area marked the end of World War Two.

Japanese officials have decided to deport fourteen Chinese activists and journalists accused of illegally entering the country's territory. They were seized when they landed on an island that Japan controls, but China claims.

The group traveled by boat to what is known in Japan as the Senkaku islands. In China and Taiwan, the islands are called Diaoyu. No one lives there. However they are in a gas-rich area and surrounded by rich fishing grounds.

The activists who landed on one of the islands Wednesday placed a Chinese flag in the ground. They also sang the country's national anthem before being arrested.

Chinese officials said the arrests were illegal and called for the immediate release of the group. Demonstrators supporting China gathered in front of the Japanese Embassy and its consulates in China.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda decided Friday to deport the activists without charging them.

(SOUND)

Mr. Noda said it was "deeply regrettable" that the activists entered Japan's territorial waters and landed on one of the Senkaku islands illegally. He added that they had been warned not to do so.

Japan controlled the Senkaku Islands until after World War Two. At that time, they came under temporary control of the United States. China does not recognize the nineteen fifty-one Treaty of San Francisco, under which Japan transferred control of the islands to the United States.

In nineteen seventy-two, the United States transferred the islands back to Japan. They represent not only important natural resources, but also a source of national pride in both Japan and China. Taiwan also claims the islands.

In separate developments, Japanese officials want to take a territorial dispute with South Korea before the International Court of Justice.

The dispute centers on a group of islets called Takeshima in Japan and Dokdo in South Korea. South Korea controls the very small islands, but Japan claims them. The dispute worsened last week, when South Korean President Lee Myung-bak visited the islands. His visit caused a sharp protest from Japan.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura said Friday that his country wants to deal with the dispute calmly, under international law.

He says Japan proposed to the South Korean government that the country take the case to the International Court of Justice within the next few days. Japan needs South Korea's approval to take the matter to court. But South Korea's foreign ministry dismissed the proposal. The ministry said the islands are part of its territory.

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

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Contributing: Miguel Quintana