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A/CN.4/L.53

**Observations of the Government of Poland, concerning freedom of navigation on the high
seas**

Topic:
Law of the sea - régime of the high seas

Extract from the Yearbook of the International Law Commission:-
1955, vol. II

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RÉGIME OF THE HIGH SEAS

DOCUMENT A/CN.4/L.53

Observations of the Government of Poland, concerning freedom of navigation on the high seas

Transmitted by Mr. Jan Balicki, observer of Poland to the seventh session of the International Law Commission

[Original text: English]

[6 May 1955]

1. Freedom of navigation, being the most essential element of the principle of freedom of the seas, is one of the basic principles of modern international law. This has been confirmed in numerous judgments of both municipal and international courts, in works of authorities in law and in international documents like the Barcelona Declaration, the Washington declaration of 1921 and the Atlantic Charter of 1941.

2. The indisputable nature of this principle and its general recognition derive from the significance it has in international relations as a whole. Seas and oceans constituting over 70 per cent of the surface of the globe and being a natural link between continents are predestined to play an essential part in the development of international relations. This significance is reflected, above all, in the field of commercial communication, cultural, technical and other exchange. It would not be erroneous to state that the victory of the principle of freedom of navigation has contributed in a fundamental way to the development of international intercourse and exchange in the course of the last centuries.

3. From this first-rate importance of unhampered navigation on seas and oceans for the life of all nations follows the necessity to safeguard its accessibility to all nations in equal measure, so that one state or a group of states does not extend its jurisdiction over it. Freedom of navigation must be based on the principle of equal rights of all states.

4. From the basic principles of freedom of the seas and freedom of navigation follows the equal right for all states to have their own ships at sea and to participate in maritime exchange. From the principle of freedom of the seas it follows that only the state to which a given ship belongs has the right to extend its jurisdiction over it on the high seas. This concerns merchantmen and men-of-war alike. A merchant ship sailing under the flag of the country she belongs to cannot be stopped by other than warships of her own state. This principle admits very few fairly strictly defined exceptions when a merchant ship on the high seas can be stopped by a man-of-war of another state: (a) in case she commits an international crime—piracy, (b) in the case when a ship which has committed a crime on the territory of another state attempts to escape — the right of pursuit, (c) in cases provided for in international agreements — e.g., suspected smuggling or prohibited liquor trade.

5. In all these exceptional situations action undertaken by men-of-war against foreign merchantmen aims at the protection of the freedom of the seas against criminal activities or against activities recognized by multilateral agreements as harmful, and expresses the concern of various states for the safety and freedom of maritime navigation and trade. They cannot, however, be in any case a justification for any arbitrary action.

6. The exercise of the right of pursuit is confined to the state in whose port or on whose territory a foreign merchantman has committed a crime. Men-of-war of signatory states are entitled to interference in the case of an infringement of a convention and, only in the case of piracy, which is a heavy common crime, men-of-war of all states have the right of pursuit.

7. The entire development of international maritime law aims at strengthening the safety of sea navigation in all its aspects.

8. For some time, however, we have been witnessing the most brutal violation of age-old principles by those who direct hostile activities against vessels of many states. In the China seas the stopping of merchantmen, the seizure of their cargoes, the detention of the crews are organized on a wide scale. According to statements by Lloyds, 70 vessels under various flags were subject to these illegal acts between 23 August 1949 and 16 December 1953. This figure is not complete, as other vessels were detained at a later time, *inter alia*, the Soviet tanker *Tuapse*. Among the seized vessels there were two Polish merchant ships: *Praca* detained and captured in October 1953, and *Prezydent Gottwald* in May 1954.

9. The above acts are sufficient proof of the violation in an unprecedented way of the freedom of navigation in the China seas. It is characteristic that these acts cannot be justified by any legal arguments. They are simply an expression of force applied by the use of modern technical means. Foreign men-of-war assisted by airplanes forced to stop Polish ships maintaining peaceful commercial communication with the Chinese People's Republic. Faced with the threat of the use of force and with a possible sinking of the ships, the Polish masters were compelled to submit to orders aimed at bringing the ships together with their cargoes and crews to Taiwan. These orders were not justified by anything. None of the Polish ships committed a crime on Chinese territorial waters or any acts which might be regarded as piratical. None of the Polish ships violated any provisions of inter-

national conventions which entitle foreign men-of-war to apply means of compulsion. Thus the application of such means was an act of utter lawlessness. As follows from the above, the very act of stopping the ships by the use of force was illegal and has no justification whatsoever. In this way the right of the flag, which follows from the principle of state sovereignty, was violated.

10. It should also be pointed out that the stopping of ships on the high seas violates the freedom of navigation. Merchantmen carrying cargoes in trade exchange between countries are seriously endangered and their possibility of unhampered sailing on sea routes is thus restricted.

11. The acts committed in the China seas constitute a most serious crime — namely, piracy.

12. The circumstances of the seizure of both Polish ships clearly show that violence was used against them. On the high seas two Polish merchant ships were stopped by warships and brought to the island of Taiwan. This was committed under the threat of the use of weapons involving a constant danger to the lives of the members of the crews. This is thus the main evidence that the act committed against the Polish vessels has marks of piracy.

13. In these concrete cases there also was *animus furandi* — i.e., the intent to plunder for gain confirmed by many lawyers as an element of piracy.

14. The seizure of Polish ships which finds no justification in international law is qualified as piracy, as *delictum jure gentium*, and it should be treated accordingly. All authorities in international law agree that a crime thus committed on the high seas open to all states must be prosecuted by all states, as freedom of navigation is not an abstract notion but involves certain rights and duties. It involves not only the duty for a state not to hamper by its activities the free use of navigation routes by ships of other states, but also the duty of adopting an

active attitude by the state with regard to the observance of that principle.

15. In view of the principles enunciated above, some of the formulations contained in the sixth report on the régime of the high seas cannot but give rise to doubts. Articles 22 and 23 of the draft articles relating to the régime of the high seas are particular cases in point.

16. It seems advisable in article 22 to stress the importance of the general repression of piracy — the first two sentences of the article to read as follows :

“All states are required to co-operate for the more effective repression of piracy and of the slave trade on the high seas. They shall adopt efficient measures to prevent and punish piracy and to prevent the transport of slaves on vessels authorized to fly their colours and the unlawful use of their flag.”

17. The formulation of article 23 of the draft is in conflict with established views on piracy. It should be clear that the words “*bona fide* purpose of asserting a claim of right” cannot be used in connexion with such actions as robbery, rape, wounding, enslavement and killing. It should be clear, for instance, that robbery or enslavement, being by their nature illegal and criminal, could not be committed with a *bona fide* purpose. Similarly the words “for private ends” should be omitted, since no ends, even when described by the perpetrators as not being “private” (i.e., “public”) can justify acts of piracy. The present wording of article 23, if accepted and embodied in an international convention, could be used by pirates to justify any action by maintaining that their action had the *bona fide* “purpose of asserting a claim of right” and that they were not acting “for private ends”.

18. Finally it should be stated that the draft articles do not appear to contain a clear and unambiguous formulation of the acknowledged principle of freedom of navigation on the high seas.

DOCUMENT A/CN.4/L.58

Observations of the Government of the Union of South Africa, concerning freedom of navigation on the high seas

Note verbale from the permanent delegation of the Union of South Africa to the United Nations — dated 10 May 1955

[Original text: English]
[17 May 1955]

1. The Deputy Permanent Representative of the Union of South Africa presents his compliments to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and has the honour to refer to the latter's Note No. PSCA.264/26/013 of 7 January 1955, concerning the resolution which the General Assembly adopted on 17 December 1954 on the item entitled “Complaint of Violation of the Freedom of Navigation in the area of the China Seas”.

2. In connexion with the request that the Union Government submit their views to the International Law Commission concerning the principle of freedom of navigation on the high seas, the Deputy Permanent Representative has been directed to state that the Union Government's attitude towards the resolution under reference was explained in the *Ad Hoc* Political Committee by the Union's Representative on the Committee. On that occasion he stated that the delegation would abstain

from voting on the proposed resolution transferring the records of the debate to the International Law Commission and inviting Member States to submit to that body their views on the principle of freedom of navigation. He pointed out that as the *Ad Hoc* Committee had not debated the principle of freedom of navigation, the records would hardly be useful to that Commission; and that as the Commission was engaged in a study of the question, it should be for them or for the Sixth Committee to invite the comments of Member States.

3. In the circumstances the Union Government do not propose at this stage to offer their views on the general principle of the freedom of navigation. The question will, however, be studied when the International Law Commission has formulated the first draft of the proposed articles and when it invites the comments of Member States, in accordance with its usual practice.