

Panama and China push back against Trump's canal threats

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Security officers stand in front of cranes on the Panama Canal [File: Reuters]

Panama City, January 22 (RHC)-- Panama and China have pushed back against United States President Donald Trump's controversial claims regarding the Panama Canal.

The Panama Canal "was not a gift" from the U.S., Panama's President Jose Raul Mulino said on Wednesday in response to Trump's threat to seize control of the strategic waterway.

Beijing, meanwhile, rejected the U.S. president's assertion that it is effectively in control of the canal.

"We reject in its entirety everything that Mr Trump has said," Mulino said during a panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. "First because it is false and second because the Panama Canal belongs to Panama and will continue to belong to Panama. The Panama Canal was not a concession or a gift from the United States."

Trump has previously refused to rule out military action to take control of the canal, which the U.S. opened in 1914 to provide a trade route linking its east and west coasts but handed to Panama in 1999.

During his inauguration on Monday, the U.S. president repeated his complaint that China was effectively "operating" the canal, which was "foolishly given to Panama," thanks to a growing presence around the waterway.

"We didn't give it to China, we gave it to Panama. And we're taking it back," Trump declared.

Panama City on Tuesday made a formal complaint to the United Nations, referring to an article of the UN Charter precluding any member from "the threat or use of force" against the territorial integrity or political independence of another.

In a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, it requested that the UN Security Council – on which the US has a veto – take up the matter.

On Wednesday, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing said, "China does not participate in the management and operation of the canal and has never interfered in the affairs of the canal."

Mulino has previously denied that any nation interferes with the Panama Canal, saying that it operates on a principle of neutrality.

However, Panama has announced that it now plans an audit of the canal and the Panama Ports Company, a subsidiary of Hong Kong-based conglomerate CK Hutchison Holdings that operates the ports of Balboa and Cristobal on either end of the canal.

As well as outlining his determination to seize the Panama Canal, Trump has also provoked a mixture of worry and mirth with threats to use military or economic power to force Denmark to sell Greenland to the U.S., and plans to change the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the "Gulf of America".

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