Philippines: Sanjia steel plant operation draws scrutiny over military role

PH authorities defend interagency enforcement action as Maltese records add detail to questions over Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr.'s former citizenship

MANILA, PHILIPPINES, September 11, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The involvement of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in an operation at a Chinese-linked steel plant has drawn attention to the military's role in an enforcement action involving immigration, labor and regulatory issues.

The May 15 operation at Philippine Sanjia Steel Corp. in Tagoloan, Misamis Oriental, resulted in the arrest of 69 Chinese nationals, according to Philippine media reports citing government authorities.

The Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Commission said the operation was a lawful interagency law enforcement action and that the Armed Forces provided security and logistical support.

Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr., who inspected the site during the operation, subsequently praised participating agencies and warned against efforts to interfere with the investigation, according to the Philippine News Agency.

The Chinese Embassy in Manila challenged the government's account and questioned why Teodoro and military resources became involved.

In an Aug. 16 statement, Embassy spokesperson Ji Lingpeng questioned the defense secretary's participation in an enforcement operation involving Chinese workers and alleged selective treatment. Philippine authorities rejected that characterization, saying the operation concerned suspected violations of Philippine law rather than nationality.

The dispute has also expanded into a national-security debate.

Rear Adm. Roy Vincent Trinidad, the AFP spokesperson for the West Philippine Sea, said during an Aug. 29 news forum that recently raided steel facilities could potentially serve as entry points for undocumented Chinese nationals.

Philippine authorities have not publicly established that Sanjia Steel engaged in espionage or deliberately facilitated infiltration.

GMA News and MindaNews also reported that Teodoro raised concerns about Sanjia's proximity to a Philippine Navy dry dock being constructed within the PHIVIDEC Industrial Estate.

Government actions against Sanjia and two other steel plants have meanwhile affected Filipino employees. The Federation of Free Workers and Kilusang Mayo Uno-Southern Mindanao said about 900 workers were displaced following operations against plants in Misamis Oriental, Pampanga and Davao City, according to GMA News and Philstar.com.

Sanjia has contested the government's actions. Company legal counsel Julia Chu characterized the raid as harassment and argued that alleged regulatory violations should have been handled by civilian agencies, according to GMA News.

The debate comes as Teodoro faces a separate dispute concerning his former Maltese citizenship.

The Department of National Defense confirmed in July 2025 that Teodoro previously possessed Maltese citizenship and a passport. Teodoro has said he applied for citizenship in 2014 through Malta's Individual Investor Programme while a private citizen and obtained it in 2016.

Official Malta Government Gazette records provide additional information about his family's citizenship history.

The Maltese government's list of people naturalized or registered as citizens during 2016 includes "Gilberto Eduardo Gerardo Cojuangco Teodoro," together with entries for "Jaime Gilberto Prieto Teodoro" and "Monica Louise Lopez Teodoro JR."

Teodoro's wife is former Philippine congresswoman Monica Prieto-Teodoro and their son is Jaime Gilberto Teodoro. The Gazette does not state the relationship among those listed, the citizenship route used by each individual or whether passports were issued.

DND spokesperson Arsenio Andolong has said Teodoro surrendered and renounced his Maltese passport before filing his certificate of candidacy for the 2022 Senate elections. DND said the passport had been disclosed to the Bureau of Immigration and Commission on Elections and later to the Commission on Appointments before his confirmation as defense secretary in 2023.

The Associated Press reported in July 2025 that the Defense Department said Teodoro had renounced his Maltese citizenship before returning to public office.

Questions resurfaced in June 2026 when complainants filed perjury and falsification complaints with the Pasay City Prosecutor's Office seeking examination of Teodoro's citizenship and passport records, according to Philippine media reports.

The Defense Department rejected the allegations and said the complainants had not presented evidence establishing wrongdoing.

Republic Act No. 9225 allows natural-born Filipinos who acquire foreign citizenship to retain or reacquire Philippine citizenship under specified conditions. For those appointed to public office, Section 5 requires an oath of allegiance to the Philippines and renunciation of the oath of allegiance to the foreign country.

There has been no public finding that Teodoro violated Philippine law concerning his citizenship status.

The Sanjia operation and citizenship dispute are separate matters, but both have generated calls for greater disclosure concerning the Defense Department’s actions and Teodoro’s official records.

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