

THE TIMES

Europe

Spain threatens to involve Argentina in Gibraltar dispute

Laura Pitel, Political Correspondent and Martin Roberts in Madrid, Madrid

12 Aug 2013 00:01:54

Britain has dismissed a threat by Spain to join forces with Argentina in the latest twist in the row over Gibraltar.

Spanish media claimed yesterday that José García-Margallo, the country's Foreign Minister, could use a visit to Buenos Aires next month to plan for a provocative joint move at the UN.

Only last week President Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina renewed her demand for sovereignty over the Falkland Islands.

In an interview yesterday, Mr García-Margallo confirmed that his Government was considering pushing for a UN resolution that would echo a 1966 vote calling for decolonisation, although he did not confirm reports that he could team up with Mrs Kirchner.

He added that Spain might also take legal action at the International Criminal Court in The Hague over the "illegal occupation" of a strip of land that was not ceded to Britain with the Rock in the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, as well as jurisdiction over adjacent waters.

While a spokesman for the Spanish Foreign Ministry declined to discuss a possible partnership with Argentina, he said there would be an "exchange of ideas" during the visit.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office poured scorn on claims of UN action, insisting that it did not pose a risk to Britain's claim to sovereignty.

"Our policy on Gibraltar at the UN has not changed and is consistent with our policies on other Overseas Territories: self-determination matters more than territorial integrity, and the people of Gibraltar have repeatedly and overwhelmingly expressed their wish to remain under British sovereignty," a spokeswoman said. "The UK's position is entirely consistent with the purposes and principles of the UN, which include the principle of self-determination."

The centuries-old dispute was reignited this month when the authorities in Gibraltar dropped concrete blocks into disputed waters. Gibraltar said that the artificial reef was designed to protect fishing stocks, but Spain protested it endangered the

environment, as well as the livelihood of local fishermen. It retaliated by tightening border controls and causing delays of up to seven hours, which led to a diplomatic protest by Britain.

Spain has been careful in its stance over the Falkland Islands. At the time of the 1982 conflict, Spain remained neutral and abstained from voting on the UN resolution that condemned the Argentine junta's invasion of the islands. But the El País newspaper suggested that the Foreign Minister might also take advantage of a visit to Buenos Aires to make common cause with Argentina over the Falklands.

Mr García-Margallo appeared to backtrack yesterday on threats that he made last week to charge a €50 border tax. While he said the move would compensate fishermen for lost earnings, he conceded that it would also have been punitive for 7,000 Spanish commuters.

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José Manuel García-Margallo appeared to backtrack on plans to charge a €50 tax to enter or leave the territory

Jon Nazca/Reuters

Publisher: News International Ltd

Published Date: 12 Aug 2013 00:01:54

Article Id: 8924375 Version: 3

Word Count: 453

Character Count: 2293

