

UAE protests to Iran over facilities on disputed island

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The United Arab Emirates said on Thursday it has protested to Iran about the setting up of two facilities on one of three disputed Gulf islands and demanded they be dismantled.

Iran's charge d'affaires in Abu Dhabi was "summoned to the foreign ministry today and handed ... a protest note over the Iranian measure" on Abu Musa island, a foreign ministry official was quoted by the state WAM news agency as saying.

WAM said the move followed a report broadcast on Iran's state television saying Tehran had established a maritime rescue office and a ship registration office on Abu Musa.

The official described the establishment of the offices as "illegitimate and a flagrant violation" of a November 1971 memorandum of understanding governing the island's status.

"The memorandum of understanding did not transfer sovereignty over Abu Musa, or any part of it, to the Islamic republic of Iran," the Emirati official said, urging Tehran to "revoke any measures" that flout the agreement.

He urged Iran to accept international arbitration to resolve the row over Abu Musa as well as over Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb -- two other islands controlled by Iran and claimed by the UAE.

The oil-rich UAE, supported by other Arab states, has repeatedly proposed resolving the dispute over the three strategic Gulf islands through direct negotiations or international arbitration, but Iran has always refused.

Iran, then ruled by the pro-Western shah, gained control of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa as British forces left the Gulf in 1971.

Iran took possession of Greater and Lesser Tunbs, while Abu Musa -- the only inhabited island -- was placed under joint administration under a deal with Sharjah, now part of the UAE.

But since then, the UAE says, the Iranians have taken control of all access to the island, installed an airport and military base there, as well as encouraged settlers to move in to change its demographic make-up.

The dispute has been a sore point in relations between the UAE and Iran despite wide-ranging links. The UAE is Tehran's top trade partner and an estimated 450,000 Iranians live in the country.

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