

Iran Missile Hits A Gulf Tanker Owned in U.S.

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Oct. 16, 1987



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An Iranian missile struck an American-owned tanker in Kuwaiti waters today, causing a huge explosion and setting the tanker ablaze, the Pentagon said. But the Reagan Administration ruled out a response because the ship was not flying the American flag and was not in international waters.

Pentagon officials said they believed the attack had been carried out with a Chinese-made Silkworm missile. If so, it would be the first time such a missile had damaged a ship in the Iran-Iraq war.

The missile hit the tanker Sungari, which flies the Liberian flag, in the starboard side while anchored off Al Ahmadi, Kuwait's main oil-loading terminal, shipping officials told Reuters. The vessel's owner was identified as the OMI Corporation of New York.

Out of concern about such attacks, American companies owning or chartering ships in the Persian Gulf that fly foreign flags have asked the Reagan Administration to consider protecting them as it does Kuwaiti tankers flying the American flag. [Page A8.] Four Kuwaiti-owned tankers re-registered under the American flag were at the same terminal as the Sungari, but were not damaged.

"It appears to have been a Silkworm," Fred Hoffman, the Pentagon spokesman, said of the missile attack. But he added, "We don't have a final conclusion."

When asked whether the United States would respond, Mr. Hoffman said: "Our shipping has not been struck and in this case is not affected. There is no response indicated in this present situation."

With its range of 50 miles or more, the Silkworm, a ground-launched missile Iran is believed to have acquired from China, can hit any ship passing through the Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the gulf. Today's attack occurred at the other end of the gulf, near the Iranian-occupied Fao Peninsula.

The Associated Press said the missile might have been fired from Iranian-occupied territory in Iraq.

Iran has set up Silkworm battery sites at both ends of the gulf, according to military officials.

The United States is committed to protecting ships registered as American and flying the American flag, regardless of ownership. It does not protect American-owned tankers such as the

Sungari that fly under "flags of convenience" to avoid hiring American crews, paying American taxes and union wages and meeting American safety standards.

At a news conference, Secretary of State George P. Shultz described the Iranian attack as "a very hostile action toward Kuwait." He implied that it should not be interpreted as an attack against the United States because it did not occur in international waters and was not aimed at a tanker under American naval escort.

Last month, at least one other missile believed to have been a Silkworm was fired from Fao against another major oil installation in Kuwait, but the missile fell short of its target.

President Reagan appeared to know few details of the attack when questioned by reporters at the beginning of a meeting with Senate Republican leaders. But he added to the confusion surrounding the incident when he did not clearly rule out a response.

"Our policy is still that we're going to defend ourselves if we're attacked," Mr. Reagan said. When a reporter asked if the United States might respond by "taking out" the Silkworm missile batteries on land, the President replied: "Well, again, as I say, there's been no discussion on tactics and strategy. Even when there is, I don't know that it's something that we should make public."

A White House spokesman later clarified the President's remarks, saying he did not mean to give the impression that the United States was considering a response.

The Iranian attack came as Administration officials confirmed that the United States and Iran had exchanged a series of messages in recent months that explain their policies and defend their actions in the gulf.

The American messages, drafted at high levels of the State Department, at first generated no response, but now are replied to regularly by Iran's Foreign Ministry, officials said.

"The main development," a senior State Department official said, "is that the Iranians have started answering the messages."

Washington has defined in detail certain "red lines" that will result in an American response, including attacks on United States naval vessels or ships flying the United States flag, or any attacks against American installations or citizens, officials said.

The United States sent its most recent message last weekend, informing Iran that the American helicopter attack on small Iranian boats in the Persian Gulf last week was made in self-defense and would be repeated when necessary, but was not an attempt to provoke a confrontation, according to Administration officials. U.N. SETS DEADLINE UNITED NATIONS, N.Y., Oct. 15 (Special to The New York Times) -Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar gave Iran and Iraq 15 days today to respond to new peace proposals.

He presented his proposals after receiving more flexible negotiating instructions from the Security Council.

Details of the Secretary General's new peace proposals were not disclosed. But the Council agreed he could be more flexible in negotiating steps to carry out the peace plan it approved in July, diplomats said.

In his talks in Teheran last month, the Secretary General was told by Iranian leaders they were ready to accept a formal cease-fire as soon as an impartial tribunal declared Iraq the aggressor and would observe an informal one while that body deliberated.

As a result, the Secretary General is now seeking to link the cease-fire with establishing the body to investigate responsibility for the war.