

Cairo bars Iran ship with arms for Gaza

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Correspondents in Jerusalem | January 28, 2009

AN Iranian freighter carrying weaponry for Hamas has been blocked by Egypt from entering the Suez Canal, amid concerns that Tehran is trying to supply the Palestinian militant group with missiles capable of striking Tel Aviv.

Reports yesterday said Israel was closely tracking the ship, which is docked in the Red Sea outside the Suez Canal after Cairo refused to permit it to cross the waterway to the Mediterranean.

The stand-off comes after a report to the Israeli Defence Ministry from the Pentagon said the US Navy had boarded another Iranian vessel and said it was carrying artillery shells and other weapons.

"This is a big test for the Egyptians," a senior Israeli defence official told The Jerusalem Post. "So far the Egyptians have prevented the ship from crossing the Suez and we hope it will stay that way."

Israeli defence officials told the paper Iran was trying to supply Hamas with new Grad-model Katyusha rockets and to replace high-grade explosives that were exhausted or destroyed by the Israeli Defence Force during this month's war in Gaza.

The IDF is concerned Iran will supply Hamas with long-range Fajr missiles capable of reaching Tel Aviv.

A US Navy task force fighting pirates in the Gulf of Aden has been instructed to track Iranian arms shipments to Gaza.

Reports last week said troops from the USS San Antonio boarded a former Russian cargo vessel that was flying a Cypriot flag and was reportedly carrying weaponry destined for Hamas.

The French have also dispatched a frigate to the Mediterranean to participate in the clampdown on the Gaza Strip and to prevent weapons shipments from reaching Hamas, the Post said.

Israeli defence officials told the paper that since the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead, large quantities of explosives, machine guns and other weaponry had arrived in the Sinai peninsula, but the Egyptians were taking measures to prevent them from being smuggled into Gaza.

The reports came as US President Barack Obama yesterday sent envoy George Mitchell to the Middle East with a brief to "engage vigorously" to achieve real progress.

Mr Mitchell is due to visit Israel, the Palestinian West Bank and Arab states. During his trip, which lasts until Tuesday, Mr Mitchell will also travel to Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Europe.

In the short run, the trip is aimed at bolstering a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip following the three-week Israeli military offensive, and tackling the humanitarian crisis there.

State Department spokesman Robert Wood said Mr Mitchell, who will report to Mr Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, would "not have contact with Hamas", which has been labelled a terrorist group since George W. Bush was in office.

Mr Mitchell, a Maronite Catholic whose mother was Lebanese, managed to bring together the leaders of Northern Ireland's religious communities with a mixture of compromise and talks to sign the historic Good Friday agreement in 1998.

But his efforts to help end the Israeli-Palestinian violence that erupted in 2000, after the collapse of the peace process brokered by former president Bill Clinton, proved fruitless.

He set off for the region as reports yesterday said Hamas had launched an internal probe into the failures of its military wing during the Gaza offensive.

Citing an unnamed top Hamas military commander, Jane's Defence Weekly magazine said a full report by the militant organisation would be critical of almost every decision taken by Hamas battlefield commanders during the 22-day assault, which ended last week.

The source quoted by Jane's said exiled Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal and his followers had effectively pushed for a conflict the military wing was not ready for. The report would highlight the losses of Hamas interior minister Said Siam and about 50 of Hamas's top explosives experts.

Agencies

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24971772-26397,00.html>

Cairo intercepts Iranian arms ship

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Yaakov Katz , THE JERUSALEM POST

Israel is closely tracking an Iranian freighter believed to be carrying weaponry for Hamas that is currently docked in the Red Sea outside the Suez Canal, after Egypt refused to permit it to cross the waterway to the Mediterranean.

According to a report received at the Defense Ministry from the Pentagon, the US Navy recently boarded an Iranian vessel that was carrying artillery shells and other weaponry.

"This is a big test for the Egyptians," a senior defense official said. "So far the Egyptians have prevented the ship from crossing the Suez and we hope it will stay that way."

Defense officials said that Iran is trying to supply Hamas with new Grad-model Katyusha rockets and to replace high-grade explosives that were exhausted or destroyed by the IDF during Operation Cast Lead.

"There are two main smuggling routes," one official explained. "Some of the weaponry comes by ground from Somalia, Sudan and then into Egypt and through a tunnel into Gaza, while some comes by boat."

The boats sometimes unload the shipments in the Sinai's Port Said, where it is smuggled into Gaza by land. Other times, the shipments are dropped overboard in waterproof containers and are picked up by Palestinian fishermen or divers.

As reported in The Jerusalem Post last week, the IDF is concerned that Iran will supply Hamas with long-range Fajr missiles that are capable of reaching Tel Aviv.

According to the London Times, Combined Task Force 151 of the US Navy, which is fighting pirates in the Gulf of Aden, has been instructed to track Iranian arms shipments to Gaza.

Last week, the report claimed, troops from the USS San Antonio boarded a former Russian cargo vessel that was flying a Cypriot flag and was reportedly carrying weaponry destined for Hamas.

In addition to the US, the French have also dispatched a frigate to the Mediterranean to participate in the clampdown on the Gaza Strip and to prevent weapons shipments from reaching Hamas.

The frigate is carrying a helicopter that can support reconnaissance missions off the Gaza coast.

Israeli officials said they are impressed with the international community's efforts to curb the flow of weapons to Gaza, but also expect Egypt to take practical steps along the border with Gaza to uncover and destroy the smuggling tunnels.

Head of the Defense Ministry's Diplomatic-Security Bureau Amos Gilad will head to Egypt in the coming week to continue discussions on the new mechanism established to counter the smuggling.

The new mechanism Israel has set up with the Egyptians consists of three layers - intelligence cooperation, obstacles in Sinai and the deployment of new tunnel-detection technology along the Egypt-Gaza border.

Defense officials said that, since the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead, large quantities of explosives, machine guns and other weaponry had arrived in the Sinai peninsula, but the Egyptians were taking measures to prevent them from

being smuggled into Gaza, including erecting road blocks near Rafah and increasing patrols in the area.

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