

Israel seizes ship with alleged Hezbollah-bound arms

Contributed by Richard Boudreaux, LATimes
 Thursday, 05 November 2009
 Last Updated Thursday, 05 November 2009

Israel's navy intercepts a vessel off Cyprus that it says contained 300 tons of weapons being smuggled by Iran to Syria, bound for Hezbollah militants in Lebanon. Iran and Syria deny the charge.

Reporting from Jerusalem - Israel's navy seized a cargo ship Wednesday, intercepting what officials described as 300 tons of weapons being smuggled from Iran to Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrillas. The haul was the largest in Israel's decades of efforts to curb arms flows to its militant Middle East foes.

Hundreds of dark green rockets, mortar shells and boxes of grenades and ammunition were displayed on the dock in Israel's port of Ashdod hours after the predawn naval operation in the Mediterranean Sea near Cyprus. In the evening, Israeli forces were still unloading the 40 containers of armaments reported to have been found aboard the Antigua-flagged vessel, Francop, which remained under guard in the port.

The weapons, which included Grad-type Katyusha rockets, had been concealed beneath civilian goods and enclosed in a plastic material capable of fooling electronic scanners, Israeli officials said.

Rear Adm. Roni Ben-Yehuda, the deputy Israeli navy commander, said the cache was "a drop in the ocean" of arms being shipped to Hezbollah, an Islamic militia that pelted Israel with rockets during a monthlong war three years ago.

Israeli officials made the most of the seizure to bolster their assertion that Iran, with Syria's complicity, is arming enemies of the Jewish state, in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions that bar Iran from exporting weapons. Iran and Syria deny the allegation.

SkyNews Video

{flv}IsraelShipSkyNews{/flv}

"Today the whole world can see the large gap between Syria and Iran's statements and their actual activities," Israeli President Shimon Peres said. "The ship's arrest is not only of critical military importance, but also of political importance. Facts cannot be argued with."

Captured containers on display in the port bore Iranian shipping codes in English -- IRISL on one side, I.R. Iranian Shipping Lines Group on the other.

Lt. Col. Avital Leibovich, a military spokeswoman, said a cargo certificate gave the containers' origin as the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. Ben-Yehuda said the shipment was headed for Latakia, Syria's principal port.

The certificate was not shown to reporters. Israeli officials offered no evidence that Hezbollah was the intended recipient of the weapons, except to note that Israeli intelligence had previously identified Latakia, on the Mediterranean, as a conduit for armaments sent by land to the guerrilla group's strongholds in neighboring Lebanon.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem, speaking to reporters during a visit to Iran, acknowledged that the commandeered vessel had been sailing to his country but denied that any weapons were aboard, according to Iran's Mehr news agency. Iran also denied sending weapons. Hezbollah issued no reaction.

Israeli officials said the Francop picked up the weapons in Damietta, Egypt.

An official of United Feeder Services, the Cyprus-based shipping company that leased the 450-foot commercial vessel from German owners, told Israel's Ynet online news agency that the company did not know what was inside the containers and was not allowed to inspect them before the ship left Egypt.

Israeli officials said they did not believe that Egypt's government, the vessel's Polish captain or its crew were aware of any weapons.

The officials suspect that the weapons were smuggled to Damietta on several other vessels from Iran by way of the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.

"This is a well-known Iranian technique, taking advantage of cargo ships flying different flags in order to smuggle containers loaded with large amounts of highly volatile weaponry to terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah," the Israeli military said in a statement.

After several days of surveillance, Israel sent a large naval force to intercept the Francop in international waters off the Cypriot coast, about 100 miles northwest of Israel, officials said. They said a commando team met no resistance as it boarded the cargo ship, conducted a random inspection and began finding weapons. The Francop was then escorted to Ashdod.

Ben-Yehuda, who briefed reporters in the port, would not say whether Israel had intelligence about the cargo. He said Israeli and Western intelligence agencies keep constant tabs on suspected smuggling lanes.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the arms were "intended to hit Israeli cities."

Israeli leaders gave no hint in their public comments Wednesday that they were contemplating military action in response to the alleged smuggling attempt. The Israel-Lebanon border has been largely quiet since the 2006 war, although Israel has warned that Hezbollah has been rearming and now possesses about 40,000 rockets.

boudreaux@latimes.com

Times staff writer Borzou Daragahi in Beirut contributed to this report.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-israel-arms-boat5-2009nov05,0,7130886.story>

Israel says intercepted arms shipment was destined for Hizbollah
By Vita Bekker in Tel Aviv and Harvey Morris at the United Nations
Published: November 5 2009 02:00 | Last updated: November 5 2009 02:00

Israel's navy has seized a container ship originating in Iran and loaded with arms, including rockets, destined for Syria and Lebanon's Shia group Hizbollah, the Israeli military said yesterday.

The rare pre-dawn interception was seized on by Israeli government officials to underscore their argument that their arch-foe was supplying weapons to militant groups targeting the Jewish state. Israel has warned that Hizbollah has been rearming since the group launched more than 4,000 rockets into its territory during a 34-day war in mid-2006.

Israel's military said a navy force on Tuesday night boarded the ship, which was flying the flag of Antigua, about 100 miles west of Israel's coast. Following an inspection that showed the ship carried a variety of weapons hidden behind what appeared to be civilian cargo, it was towed to an Israeli port.

Shimon Peres, Israel's president, said during a visit to a military base: "The army successfully captured a ship that seems to have come from Iran and was heading to Syria and to Hizbollah . . . Iran and Syria are arming terror organisations, especially Hizbollah and Hamas, and are clearly acting to undermine peace in the Middle East." Hamas is the Palestinian Islamist group that rules the Gaza Strip.

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, said the weapons found in the vessel could have "hit Israeli cities".

Israeli media identified the vessel as Francop, a 137-metre-long German ship whose captain is of Polish nationality, and said it was boarded by navy commandos without incident and towed to the Ashdod port in southern Israel. According to the reports, the military had advance information about the ship, which carried more than 60 tonnes of weaponry, including rockets, assault rifles, mortar shells and grenades.

One of the largest arms-smuggling vessels intercepted by Israel was the Karine A, seized in the Red Sea in January 2002 carrying 50 tonnes of missiles and other weapons that Israel claimed were sent by Iran to Palestinian militants in Gaza.

The allegations came as European and Arab diplomats at the United Nations were negotiating on a compromise resolution that could further press Israel to mount its own wide-ranging inquiry into alleged war crimes committed during its invasion of Gaza at the turn of the year.

The talks were under way as the UN General Assembly began debating the controversial Goldstone human rights report that found that some of the actions of both Israel and its Hamas foes during the offensive might have amounted to crimes against humanity.

Both Israel and the US have condemned the report as unbalanced. However, European states said they would be prepared to support a resolution that took note of the report without fully endorsing its findings.

A resolution by the General Assembly would not be binding on Israel or the Palestinians, but it would push the issue back to the Security Council, which has the power to refer the findings to the International Criminal Court if either side failed to mount satisfactory investigations.

Diplomats said the US was likely to vote against any resolution, having previously condemned the report by Richard Goldstone, a South African jurist, as flawed.

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2009

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/83389b12-c9ab-11de-a071-00144feabdc0.html?ftcamp=rss>

Around the Web|Israeli navy says it seized ship carrying arms bound for Hezbollah|[washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)WATCH: Is Iran Sending Weapons to Hezbollah?|abcnews.go.com|Iran and Syria deny arms claims|news.bbc.co.uk