

# Iran Arms at Cyprus Naval Base Explode Killing 11

Contributed by Naharnet  
Monday, 11 July 2011

Huge blasts in a seized Iranian weapons cache at a Greek Cypriot naval base in the south of the Mediterranean island killed at least 11 people on Monday, state media said.

The force of the explosions blew out virtually every window in the nearby fishing village of Zygi, whose seafront restaurants are popular with the many tourists who frequent the resort island, an Agence France Presse correspondent reported.

The island's largest power station at Vassiliko right next to the base was virtually leveled by the blast, causing widespread power cuts that are likely to last for months.

Three of its four main buildings were virtually leveled along the generator's two main fuel tanks, the correspondent said.

The main motorway connecting the capital Nicosia with the island's second-largest city Limassol runs less than a kilometer from the plant and motorists passing at the time of the blasts reported debris flying through the air.

State television broadcast images of damaged vehicles, twisted road signs and debris strewn across the central reservation.

Five hours after the blasts, an AFP correspondent saw four fires still raging at the plant.

Interior Minister Neoklis Sylikiotis told the state CNA news agency that the village of Mari just east of the base was devastated by the explosion with virtually every home damaged.

Police prevented journalists from approaching the village or the Evangelos Florakis naval base itself, named after a military commander who died in a helicopter crash exactly nine years to the day before the blasts.

But the speaker of parliament, Yiannakis Omirou, who is a former defense minister and visited the scene, said the explosion had been so massive that the entire arms cache had been destroyed without trace.

President Demetris Christofias also visited the stricken base ahead of an emergency cabinet meeting.

According to public radio, the fire brigade was called to a wildfire near the base at 4:24 am (01:24 GMT) and that the explosions followed at 5:50 am (02:50 GMT) as the fire raged out of control.

Five firefighters were among the 11 dead, who also included four members of the Greek Cypriot National Guard and two sailors, CNA said. State television said at least 12 people were killed.

Wildfires are a frequent problem in Cyprus in the tinder-dry conditions created by the searing summer heat.

Health Minister Christos Patsalides said three people were undergoing emergency surgery after being seriously hurt by the blasts. Another 35 to 40 people had suffered more minor injuries, he said.

National Guard chief Petros Tsaliaklides told public radio that the blasts struck among containers of Iranian munitions seized from Cypriot-flagged vessel M/V Monchegorsk in 2009.

It was intercepted in the eastern Mediterranean en route to Syria in January that year and, after repeated searches, its cargo was eventually seized.

A U.N. Security Council panel concluded that March the shipment was in clear violation of an arms embargo against Iran adopted as part of U.N. sanctions imposed over Tehran's controversial nuclear program and the seized weapons were put into storage.

"There were 98 containers of gunpowder. Two of them (caught) fire and huge explosions occurred," a police spokesman told CNA news agency.

The Iranian ambassador visited the Cypriot presidential palace in Nicosia for a 20-minute meeting after the blast, public radio said.

Power was restored to the island's main international airport at Larnaca by mid-morning after extensive disruption to early flights but electricity remained out in the resort city and across much of the south of the island.

The Cyprus Electricity Authority appealed to consumers to cut down on their power use, as demand for air conditioning in the summer heat far outstripped supply from the two power stations still working, threatening to crash the entire national grid.

Cypriot authorities impounded the Iranian weapons under a 2007 sanctions resolution adopted by the Security Council.

It requires that "Iran shall not supply, sell or transfer from its territory any arms and related materiel, and that all states shall prohibit the procurement of such items from Iran."

Israeli media reported that the Monchegorsk was suspected of carrying Iranian arms destined for the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip and was detained by the Cypriot authorities in response to requests from both Israel and the United States.

Israel has long accused Iran of arming Islamists in Gaza, a charge Tehran denies even though it says it offers moral support to Hamas.

Iran reacted furiously to the interception of the cargo bound for Syria, its main Arab ally, and strongly denied accusations that the weapons were intended for either Hamas or Hizbullah.

Source Agence France Presse