

French frigate stops Iran gunboat attack

BAHRAIN (Reuters) — The Persian Gulf shipping war appears to have taken a new twist with a French frigate commander saying he threatened to open fire on Iranian gunboats attacking a Liberian tanker in the waterway.

Capt. Claude Musset, commander of the French frigate Dupleix, told reporters in Bahrain that he had intervened six days ago when Iranian gunboats attacked the Liberian tanker Rainbow.

The frigate was escorting the French vessel Orion when it saw three gunboats shooting at the Rain-

bow. The Dupleix sped to the scene, Capt. Musset said, and the gunboats veered away after the frigate radioed a warning it would open fire if they did not stop their attack.

It was the first such action made public by the French navy and appeared to signal a tougher stance towards Iran.

But Vice Adm. Guy Labouerie, the commander of the French task force in the region, said in Bahrain on Wednesday the action did not mean France was expanding its Gulf role to offer assistance to neutral

ships. "What the Dupleix did could have been done months ago. But this was the first occasion," he said.

Rules of engagement of Western navies in the Gulf have so far held them to protecting their own national shipping.

In Dubai, Iran's ambassador to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) said talks between Iran and the six Arab members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) would open soon. Ambassador Mustafa Foumeni Haeri said he was optimistic the two sides would agree it was harmful to the interests of Gulf states to have foreign warships patrolling the Gulf.

He said the meeting between officials from Iran and GCC states — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman — would also include discussions of a possible halt to attacks on merchant

ships. Iraq has assailed the talks.

The talks between Iran and the GCC states follow mediation efforts by Syria, Tehran's main Arab backer in its 7½-year war with Iraq.

Iraq's government press has bitterly attacked the proposed meeting, saying it was an attempt to drive a wedge between Baghdad and its Gulf Arab supporters.

In a related development, five West German warships set out from the North Sea port of Wilhelms-haven yesterday for NATO duty in the Mediterranean — the first time West Germany has sent a complete naval battle group to the area.

The flotilla of one destroyer, three frigates and a supply ship will fill in for U.S. and other NATO Mediterranean naval units sent to patrol the Gulf.

Have our subs become vulnerable?

GREGORY FOSSEDAL

From a highly unlikely source comes a grave warning to those who shape U.S. defense policy.

The warning: America's sinking fleet of nuclear-armed submarines may be visible, now or in the near future, to the Soviet Union.

The source: Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who in a post-summit news conference made the following statement about prospects for verifying a possible U.S.-Soviet treaty on strategic weapons:

"Our science and our technology ... today possess the national technical means capable of verifying the presence of nuclear weapons on various naval ships, whether surface or submarines, without any actual verification or inspection on the vessels themselves.

"We suggest that, if we reach agreement on [a strategic nuclear arms treaty], we could share our achievements so that the Americans ... could see for themselves that these means help identify not only the presence but also the capacity of the nuclear warheads aboard such vessels."

Now, Mr. Gorbachev could be lying. Soviet leaders have a habit of doing that.

Or, it could be that the Soviets have discovered means of detecting nuclear weapons on subs at sea without detecting subs themselves. It's hard to imagine how, or of what use it would be as a verification device. Yet it's possible.

But the possibility must also be considered that what Mr. Gorbachev implies is true, that the Soviet Union's vast program to

America, Shadowed by Death Squads

In an unusual trial under way in Costa Rica, Honduras stands accused of maintaining an army death squad responsible for murdering four people in 1981. That a special court set up by the Organization of American States is hearing the case sets a powerful precedent — so much so that two key witnesses have now been killed.

The case ought to weigh heavily on Americans because the death squad, known as the Special Investigations Directorate or Battalion 316, was trained in Texas as part of a C.I.A. program to "professionalize" Honduran security forces.

Such training programs, defended as politically constructive, invariably expose the United States to far more risk than they could possibly be worth.

The story recalls "State of Siege," a 1972 film based on the case of an American murdered for his role in training Uruguayan police interrogators. Three years later, Congress banned all police training programs in Latin America. Then in 1985, the Reagan Administration persuaded Congress to allow police training in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Costa Rica. It was a mistake.

In addition to the four deaths that are the subject of the current trial, Battalion 316 is said to be responsible for "disappearing" 120 other victims in Honduras. No one charges that Americans encouraged or took part in this official terrorism. On the contrary: according to the testimony of a former in-

terrogator in Battalion 316, Honduran soldiers were told by C.I.A. instructors in 1980 to avoid physical coercion and use psychological pressure instead.

There is a plausible rationale for the police programs: Training might make Central American police more willing to protect individual rights. But experience argues that abuses by police are a matter of politics far more than training. Once a civilian regime was elected in Uruguay, for example, "disappearances" ceased. So did allegations of widespread torture.

In any case, Washington's real interest in police training stems more from a desire to forge links with security forces than with concern for enlightened law enforcement.

Since Battalion 316 was a unit of the army and not the police, the C.I.A. program did not literally violate the Congressional ban. But this distinction relieves no embarrassment. Because of the program, the United States stands linked to accused torturers and murderers in a country viewed by Reagan Administration officials as an offshore dependency. Worse, the Administration is conspicuous for its lack of indignation about the recent killings of the two witnesses, one a Honduran human rights official.

If the Administration won't act to make U.S. values clear, Congress can do so unmistakably: reinstate the ban on "improving" foreign police.

discover exotic means of sub detection — for example, by tracing certain "signatures" given off by nuclear engines and perhaps nuclear weapons — has paid off.

What would this mean?

If U.S. submarines are vulnerable — emphasize the "if" — then there is a serious problem to be faced by Congress, our next president and

the American people.

After all, the increasing accuracy of weapons has already rendered American land-based missiles wholly naked to a Soviet surprise attack. This window of vulnerability, much debated in the 1980 election, has not been closed by the paltry Reagan administration deployment of fewer than 50 MX missiles, as a

blue-ribbon panel headed by defense experts Fred C. Ikle and Albert Wohlstetter reported early this month.

Nor will mobile missiles — which at present rates may not be deployed until the late 1990s — necessarily