

world

Soviet mystery

Anchored minesweeper blocks trade channel

United Press International
STRAIT OF HORMUZ, Oman — Since the start of the Tehran embassy siege the Soviet Union has anchored a warship in the middle of the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most important shipping lane. No one knows what the mystery vessel is doing there.

The Russians have had a ship there since early November, said a senior Omani naval officer. "It has varied from the most modern guided missile cruiser down to what they have now, which is a leaky old minesweeper with a wooden hull.

A narrow gap of water between Oman's Musandam peninsula and the west coast of Iran, the Strait connects the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea.

Two-thirds of the industrialized West's crude oil imports — from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — transits the Strait daily on their way to Western refineries, an oil tanker passing through every 19 minutes.

At its narrowest, the strait is 24 miles across. Oman claims its 12-mile territorial limit from the east

side and Iran the same from the west. Nothing remains as international water at the heart of the strait.

However, as it widens into the Arabian Sea, the strait is about 29 miles wide, leaving a five-mile band of international water between the territorial limits of Iran and Oman. There sits an anchored T-58 Russian minesweeper with about 30 men on board.

"They aren't doing anything we can detect," said Capt. Malcom Fewtrell on his Omani patrol craft. "They rarely even have their radar on.

It would be natural to suspect the boat as an electronic surveillance "snooper" ship. But, noted Fewtrell, a British contract officer working for the Omani navy, it has no more antennae than any other Russian boat.

"They are in a position to see virtually everything that goes in and out of the strait," he said. "They could just be doing a shipping count.

"Then again, you could argue they just put it there to get everyone wondering and worrying what the hell it's there for."

Most wondering is done by the

Omanis who have sole responsibility for keeping the area trouble-free. The Iranian navy, once supreme in the gulf, has rarely been seen since the fall of the shah, and its ships are not believed to be in good condition.

The Omanis have only limited facilities for protecting the crucial waterway. They are building a radar and naval base on Goat Island in the strait to monitor traffic, but until that is completed next year, the world's most strategic shipping lane will continue to be guarded by one marine patrol craft with a 3-inch gun.

Surprisingly, the Omanis feel little more naval protection is really necessary.

"All this talk about threats to the strait or some terrorists sinking a tanker there is very much over-exaggerated," said a senior Omani naval commander.

"If terrorists blew up a tanker in the strait, all we would have to do is route the traffic around it. There's plenty of room for that. Once it sank, we would sail right over it. The water here is up to 300 feet deep."

Saudi Arabian oil minister Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani once suggested that desperate terrorists might try to

hijack a tanker sailing through the strait, but experienced sailors dismiss this prospect as totally unrealistic.

"You've got to be a right little James Bond to go up the side of a tanker steaming at 15 knots," said Fewtrell.

"If I were a madman, I might try it, but no professional sailor would. It's virtually impossible."

The Omanis do take one threat

seriously — mines. They are cheap, easy to lay and difficult to sweep. A few well-placed mines could bottle up millions of barrels of oil in the gulf. They are all the more dangerous since neither the Americans, the Omanis nor any other gulf state has a minesweeper in the vicinity.

Ironically, the only minesweeper around belongs to the Soviet navy. And nobody knows what it's doing there.

13 Liberian officials killed by firing squad

United Press International
MONROVIA, Liberia — Firing squads executed 13 former ministers and officials of the ousted Liberian regime Tuesday, including the brother of slain President William Tolbert.

A large crowd shouting "kill the

rogues" and "let us be free" watched as the 13 were led to their deaths near the military training center in Monrovia.

Among those executed was Frank E. Tolbert, the former president's eldest brother, who had been president pro tem of the Senate.

British cut staff in Tehran

United Press International
LONDON — Britain's ambassador to Iran, Sir John Graham, returned for consultations Tuesday and the Foreign Office said the embassy staff in Tehran is being cut drastically.

Officials indicated both moves were designed to support President Carter's campaign for release of the 50 hostages held for 171 days in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

But they said this did not amount to breaking off diplomatic relations with Iran.

Graham flew back from Tehran Tuesday morning. Officials said he will report to Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington on conditions there.

They said most of the approximately 30 other British Embassy staff members in Tehran also have

instructions to prepare to return home, leaving only a handful on duty in the Iranian capital.

In an earlier crisis in January, the British Embassy staff in Tehran was slashed to eight members, but was later built up again.

British citizens are being advised to leave Iran as soon as possible unless they have a pressing need to stay in the country.

Miss Lillian tours Israel

United Press International
JERUSALEM — President Carter's mother, "Miss Lillian," is winding up a four-day visit to Israel, during which she met with Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

Asked if son Jimmy gave her any advice for her meeting with Begin, she said, "Jimmy never tells me how to act anywhere."

Mrs. Carter, 81, was asked if she intended to meet with any Palestinians in Jerusalem or the occupied West Bank during her stay.

"I don't know a Palestinian from an Israelite," she said. "I don't know one from the other. I think I have met some people who were from Palestine. They were just like the Israelites to me."

She added, "Everyone is friendly to me."

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