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Reagan puts gulf ships on high alert

Information hot line

The Navy has toll-free hot lines to provide information to families of USS Stark crew. The numbers are:
1-800-368-3202,
1-800-225-7758,
1-800-523-2975

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Reagan expressed "concern and anger" yesterday over the Iraqi missile strike that killed 28 U.S. sailors aboard the guided-missile frigate Stark.

Reagan put U.S. ships on heightened alert in the Persian Gulf with authority to fire at threatening warplanes.

"We expect an apology and compensation for the men who died in this tragic incident," a White House statement said. "We also seek com-

pensation for the ship."

A letter from Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to Reagan was delivered to the State Department, expressing "deepest regret over the painful incident."

Presidential spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said: "We feel it does represent an apology. It does not address the matter of compensation."

The White House and Pentagon said the Iraqi attack was inadvertent but unexplained.

The Pentagon said the ship had at least a minute's warning that a mis-

sile had been fired at it by an Iraqi warplane, but did not try to shoot down either the missile or plane.

"We did not return the fire. I don't know the reason," Fitzwater said.

The Stark, part of a U.S. naval task force in the gulf, was hit Sunday by one — possibly two — French-made Exocet missiles while on routine patrol about 85 miles northeast of Bahrain.

It was the first attack on a U.S. warship in the nearly 7-year-old Iran-Iraq war, and the toll was the deadliest: 28 dead and 21 injured.

The missile ripped through the ship's hull, tearing a 10- to 15-foot hole in its port side. Twenty-five of the dead were trapped by intense fire in one compartment and perished.

"We don't know why this occurred," said Air Force Lt. Gen. Richard Burpee, director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Our ship was operating clearly in international waters. We did not suspect any hostile intent. We have no reason to believe there was hostile intent from Iraq."

Burpee, at a Pentagon briefing, said fires were still breaking out on the ship 24 hours after the night-time attack.

"As we speak, the captain is trying to save his ship" and was unavailable for questioning by the Pentagon, Vice Adm. Henry Mustin, deputy chief of naval operations, said early yesterday afternoon.

Reagan met for more than an hour with national security advisers. Afterward, Fitzwater issued a

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Iraq president expresses regret at attack on frigate

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statement saying, "The president has ordered a higher state of alert for U.S. vessels in the area" and that Iran and Iraq were being officially notified of the change.

"Under this status, aircraft of either country flying in a pattern which indicates hostile intent will be fired upon, unless they provide adequate notification of their intentions," the statement added.

In his letter to Reagan, Saddam Hussein assured him that the attack was accidental. He also expressed hope that this "unintentional incident will not affect our relations, which will remain cordial and based on mutual respect and the common desire to establish peace and stability in the region."

At the Pentagon, spokesman Robert Sims said he could not discuss the specifics of the warning given to Iran and Iraq.

"But we are saying that aircraft showing the same or similar flight patterns could be attacked; that a flight pattern similar to this one won't be tolerated," Sims said.

The spokesman said the orders would not lead to any immediate increase in the number of U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf and did not affect U.S. forces elsewhere. He refused to say whether the United States had specified any amount of mileage as a keep-clear zone around the U.S. ships in the gulf.

The White House statement also said the administration "will consult with Congress on these changes and related issues." The 1973 War Powers Act requires presidents to notify Congress within 48 hours after U.S. forces are put in a situation where they may become engaged in hostilities.

It also requires those forces to be withdrawn within 60 days, subject to a 30-day extension, if Congress does not declare war. Reagan, objecting that the act encroaches on the president's constitutional authority, has refused on other occasions to act formally under the act

but has submitted reports as the law requires.

Administration officials began meeting last night with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Its chairman, Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., issued a statement saying his panel "is working with the administration to ascertain the facts of the situation and how the requirements of the War Powers resolution will be fulfilled."

In brief remarks earlier in the White House Rose Garden, Reagan said, "We have protested this attack in the strongest terms and are investigating the circumstances of the incident."

"This tragic incident underscores the need to bring the Iran-Iraq war to the promptest possible end," he said. "We and the rest of the international community must redouble our diplomatic efforts to hasten the settlement that will preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both Iran and Iraq."

"At the same time, we remain deeply committed to supporting the self-defense of our friends in the gulf and to ensuring the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz."

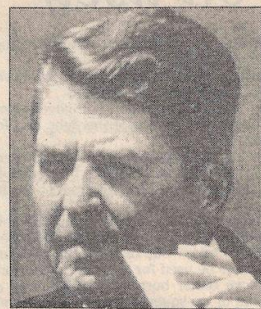
Reagan promised to report to the nation on the results of the investigation.

Expressing sympathy to the families of the victims, the president said: "Their loss and suffering will not be in vain."

"The mission of the men of the USS Stark, safeguarding the interests of the United States and the free world in the gulf, remains crucial to our national security and to the security of our friends throughout the world."

At the Pentagon, the Navy's Mustin said, "We have no indication they knew they were firing at a U.S. vessel." He noted that U.S. relations with Iraq have been improving in recent years.

Pentagon officials said the Iraqi fighter had been under surveillance by a U.S.-manned AWACS early-warning plane at the time of Sunday's attack.



President Reagan
Concerned and angry over attack

Mustin said the ship knew it had been "locked on" by the warplane's radar — a prelude to attack — and that the Stark attempted twice by radio to warn the attacker that it was a U.S. ship. He said it was not known whether the message was received.

Burpee of the Joint Chiefs staff said the ship's captain had the authority to fire at the attacker.

"It's his judgment, his call," Burpee said. "It's his call, but we certainly don't know what he was experiencing at that moment."

At the State Department, spokesman Charles Redman said the United States was not reconsidering plans to place Kuwaiti oil tankers under U.S. flags in order to provide them U.S. naval protection from Iranian missile attacks in the gulf. Negotiations on the subject were continuing, he said.

He said that despite the attack on the frigate, U.S. presence in the gulf region was a deterrent to attacks, as proven by the fact that the U.S. Navy had been in the region since 1949 and this was the first assault on either a military or commercial U.S. vessel.

The attack came almost 20 years after another Navy ship, the USS Liberty, became embroiled in a Middle East conflict. On June 8, 1967, Israeli jets and torpedo boats struck the Liberty, a Navy electronic intelligence-gathering ship that was on station in the Mediterranean Sea off the Sinai peninsula, as the Six Day War began between Israeli and Arab neighbors.