

ATTACK ON THE USS STARK

Iraqi envoy says attack unintentional

From news services

WASHINGTON — Iraq's ambassador to the United States said yesterday that his country would not intentionally open fire on a U.S. ship but indicated that Iraqi warplanes had targeted a suspected Iranian ship 20 miles from the frigate Stark.

Ambassador Nizar Hamdoun, interviewed Monday on Cable News Network, said he still was not sure that Iraqi warplanes were responsible for Sunday's missile attack on the U.S. frigate.

"My government and myself personally expressed our condolences, deep regret, to the families of the victims and to the United States government," Hamdoun said. "I'm sure that this reflects that Iraq has no intention whatsoever to attack an American ship."

Hamdoun said an investigation was under way in Baghdad to determine whether an Iraqi pilot was involved in the attack and how it happened.

Hamdoun said with all the merchant ships and naval vessels in the area, the gulf was becoming crowded.

"The gulf area is too small a place for too many ships, military ships and commercial ships and planes," Hamdoun said.

The Persian Gulf covers about 88,800 square miles.

The ambassador said the incident also could have been caused by navigational error.

"It could be some mistakes from the American part or our part," he said.

Hamdoun said if his government determines Iraqi warplanes launched the attack it would try to ensure that the incident is not repeated.

"If it was an Iraqi pilot that attacked, I should assume that it was a mistake," Hamdoun said. "Our government will take the necessary measures to punish anybody that was working against the specific instructions or got into some kind of situation where he could have done better."

Asked if his government was prepared to pay restitution to the families of the sailors injured aboard the ship, Hamdoun replied: "It's still too early for me to answer the question, and we'll see that later."

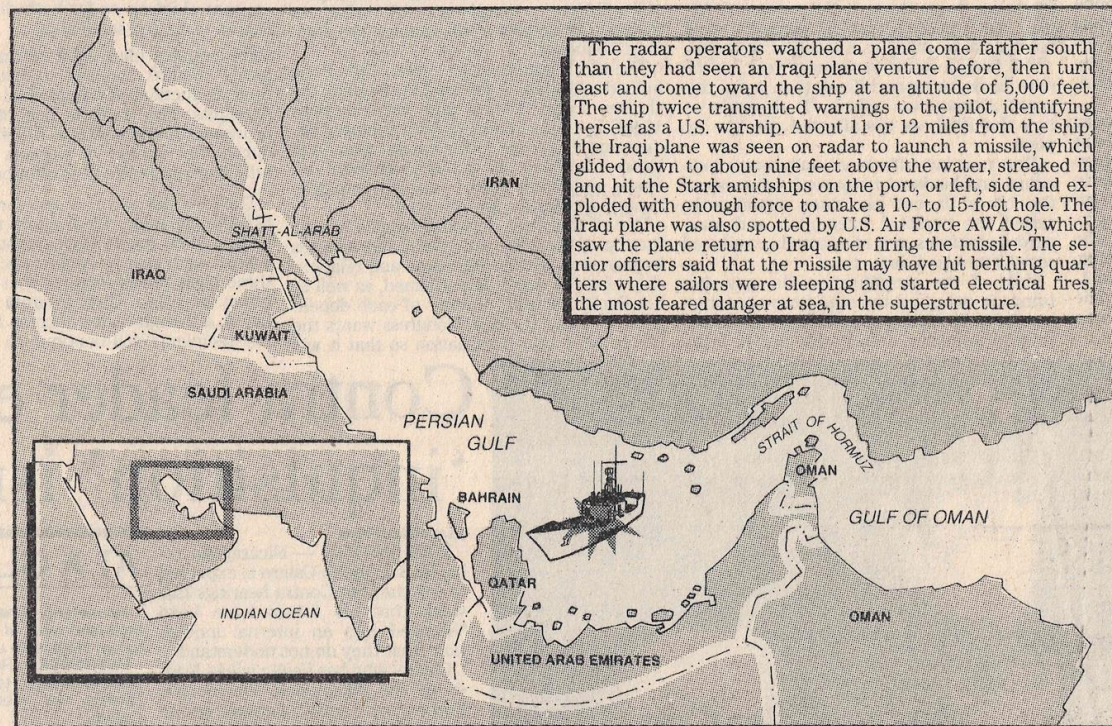
Meanwhile, Soviet media said yesterday that the attack is a sign of increased tension in the region partially because of the U.S. military presence there.

The Soviet news agency Tass issued a string of reports from Washington and Baghdad about the Sunday night attack, and the government newspaper Izvestia displayed a story about it prominently on its front page.

Directly under the report in Izvestia was a story about an explosion that damaged a Soviet tanker in the gulf Saturday night. Soviet authorities believe the ship struck a mine.

Iran and Iraq have been at war since September 1980 and their border war has spilled over into the Persian Gulf, where both sides frequently attack commercial shipping.

Izvestia quoted reports in Washington that the attack may have been an accident and quoted U.S. Secretary of State George P. Shultz as saying it pointed up the seriousness of the Iran-Iraq war.



— Staff

Another U.S. ship hit 20 years ago

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The attack on the Navy frigate USS Stark came almost 20 years after an assault on the USS Liberty, another Navy ship which became embroiled in a Mideast conflict.

It was also almost 12 years since Cambodians seized the 39-man crew of a U.S. freighter, the Mayaguez, on May 12, 1975. Fifteen Americans died in rescuing them and 23 others were killed in the crash of a helicopter en route to the area for possible use in the operation.

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 her Arab neighbors.

The attack, which occurred during daylight and good weather in international waters, killed 34 servicemen and wounded 171 others among the 294 crew members.

Officially, Israeli said it was a case of mistaken identity that occurred because the ship was thought to be Egyptian. The United States officially accepted that explanation and the Israelis eventually paid \$6.7 million worth of U.S. claims for the ship, the dead, and the wounded.

But that version has been challenged,

both by crew members of the Liberty and some top U.S. officials at the time, including Dean Rusk, then the secretary of state, and Adm. Thomas Moorer, who was chief of naval operations at the time.

The Liberty was equipped with a variety of sophisticated listening gear, one of a group of electronic intelligence-gathering ships used by the Navy in the 1960s. The service eventually ended the program because of attacks on the ships, including the 1968 seizure by North Korea of the USS Pueblo, a similar ship.

According to Moorer, the Israelis attacked because they were afraid the Liberty might intercept Israeli military communications showing that the Jewish state planned to attack neighboring Syria.

In the first attack, Israeli fighters buzzed the Liberty and attacked it with bombs. Hours later, Israeli torpedo boats attacked.

Israeli officials claimed that the Liberty bore no markings, but Liberty crew members said a large U.S. flag was flying from the stern and the ship bore identification marks painted on the side.

Russell O. David Jr., a signalman on the ship, said the first U.S. flag was shot off by the jets, but he put up another, larger flag. Crew members also said the Israelis jammed attempts to radio for help to the

U.S. Sixth Fleet, "which was 400 miles away.

"In clear visibility, this unique ship was very easy to identify," Moorer said. "The Israeli forces circled the ship and then proceeded to attack over an extended period of time. There is simply no way the fighter pilots and torpedo boat crews could have come to such a conclusion."

The Navy convened a court of inquiry, but concluded there was insufficient information to make a judgment about the reasons for the attack. The Israelis also investigated, but blamed no one.

James M. Ennes, deck officer on the Liberty at the time of the attack and author of a book on the incident, praised the Iraqi ambassador's expressed willingness yesterday to make a joint investigation of the Stark attack.

"That's certainly a departure from the Liberty incident," Ennes said in a telephone interview. "The Israelis wouldn't allow a joint investigation and wouldn't give the us their files either. They wouldn't let Americans sit in on their investigations. They gave the State Department a report some months later and asked them not to release it to the American people."