

“If it had been Iran, we would be at war. Even if there was no identification of the attacker, we would have assumed it was Iran and might have retaliated.”

**— Gary Sick,
former NSC official**

Iraq to meet U.S. demands for reparations

N.Y. Times News Service

WASHINGTON — The Iraqi government is prepared to meet the U.S. demand to pay reparations for the loss of life and damage to the \$200 million USS Stark, Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy told a congressional subcommittee yesterday.

Although the United States is officially neutral in the Iran-Iraq war, which Iraq started 6½ years ago, it has for several years been more critical of Iran for its refusal to negotiate an end to the war.

President Reagan, in remarks yesterday, described Iran as “the villain in the piece” for that reason.

But the secret arms sales to Iran, made in an effort to free hostages held in Lebanon by pro-Iranian groups, have led to doubts in the Arab world about U.S. policy.

Yesterday, several diplomats from Persian Gulf Arab countries said they attributed the absence of a harsher response toward Iraq to a vigorous effort by the United States to repair the damage done to its relations with their governments after its arms sales. They said they found the mild U.S. response both bewildering and heartening.

“The United States said it was a mistake to sell arms to Iran and now Iraq says it was a mistake that the frigate was attacked,” one Arab diplomat said. “Now the two sides are even. It’s ironic, but the only major consequence of this incident may be a warming of relations between Washington and Baghdad.”

Some experts on the Iran-Iraq war said they think if it had been Iran that had attacked the frigate, the United States would have retaliated militarily.

“If it had been Iran, we would be at war,” said Gary Sick, a former National Security Council official with the Carter administration. “Even if there was no identification of the attacker, we would have assumed it was Iran and might have retaliated.”

When questioned during testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East about what the U.S. response would be in the event of an Iranian attack, Murphy refused to speculate. But another high-ranking administration official said the response would be similar to U.S. retaliation against Libya, in which the United States took incremental steps against a series of Libyan moves that eventually led to the bombing of two Libyan cities.



Murphy

In his prepared testimony, Murphy said the administration had protested to Iraq “in the strongest terms,” but he reserved much of his criticism for Iran, which has refused to end the war unless President Saddam Hussein of Iraq is removed from power.

Murphy said the United States had protested the recent delivery by China of anti-ship missiles to Iran, but said nothing about Iraq’s military suppliers. And while he noted the increase in attacks on neutral ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz in the last 18 months, he did not say it was Iraq that carried out the majority of them.

“For the past year, Iran has been using a combination of military action, attacks on gulf shipping and terrorism, as well as shrewd diplomacy, to intimidate the Persian Gulf states not involved in the war,” Murphy said.

He did acknowledge, however, that Iran had been careful to avoid confrontations with U.S.-flag vessels when U.S. Navy vessels have been in the vicinity.

Other administration officials have indicated that relations with Iraq will continue to flourish. For years, Iraq was one of the principal “rejectionist” Arab nations, refusing to countenance any diplomatic arrangements with Israel and giving direct backing to Palestinian extremists, who often worked out of Baghdad.

But the threat of an Iranian victory in the war and Iraq’s determination to bring it to an end, as well as what administration officials said was a softening of Iraq’s position toward a Middle East settlement, have led to a steady improvement of relations.

A State Department spokeswoman, Phyllis Oakley, said yesterday the administration “has sought to deepen and broaden our contacts with the government of Iraq.” She said that a visit by Murphy to Iraq and other gulf Arab countries earlier this month was an indication of those efforts and they would continue.

The United States has said it provides no military equipment to Iraq, but continues to give it intelligence data on deployments in the Iran-Iraq war.

Meanwhile, the State Department sent formal notification yesterday to the Iraqi government demanding compensation for the attack. Although Murphy said “compensation both for the ship and victims and families will be made,” Oakley said the United States had not received a response from the Iraqis.

In a telephone interview yesterday afternoon, Iraq’s ambassador to the United States, Nizar Hamdoon, said Iraq would “look into the question in a serious and responsible manner” after it received a formal request.