

ATTACK ON THE USS STARK

Agreement reached to place U.S. flags on Kuwaiti ships

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration said yesterday that despite Iraq's attack on the USS Stark, "general agreement" has been reached to put U.S. flags and captains on some Kuwaiti tankers in the Persian Gulf, but the policy came under criticism in Congress.

Senate Republican leader Robert Dole of Kansas called for "a special, renewed examination" of the idea of putting Kuwait's ships under U.S.-flag protection.

"That plan may still make sense, but at the least, in light of Sunday's tragedy, we need to take a new look," Dole said.

The purpose of the plan is to give the United States legal authority to defend the Kuwaiti tankers with military force. The idea is that potential aggressors, especially Iran, would be deterred knowing U.S. forces were prepared to respond.

Richard Murphy, assistant secretary of state for Mideast affairs, told the House panel that Iran was "trying to split Kuwait from the rest of the gulf Arab states," which

are supporting Iraq in its war with Iran, although they are not taking part in the conflict.

"The Iranian regime has inspired terrorist attacks and sabotage incidents within Kuwait ... and attacked over 24 vessels serving Kuwaiti ports since last September," Murphy told the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East.

The agreement allowing Kuwait to register 11 of its 22 tankers in the United States will be concluded within weeks, he said.

Committee chairman Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., and panel members Reps. Lawrence J. Smith, D-Fla., Robert G. Torricelli, D-N.J., and Benjamin Gilman, R-N.Y., asked how the United States could protect Kuwaiti tankers flying the Stars and Stripes if it could not defend a Navy frigate.

"We do escort our flag vessels through the straits" at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, and before Sunday, none had been attacked, replied Lt. Gen. Richard Burpee, operations director for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Sen. Jim Sasser, D-Tenn., also questioned the policy.

"If the Kuwaiti plan is, in fact, implemented, we will be sending our young people to within 50 miles of the war zone. And for what?" Sasser asked in a Senate speech. He said only about 2 percent of the oil consumed by the United States passes through the gulf, compared to 90 percent of Japan's oil and 50 percent of Western Europe's supply.

"After all, whose oil are we protecting?" Sasser asked. "Do we see a single U.S. ally operating in the gulf? How much is Japan contributing to the protection of its Persian Gulf lifeline? The answer, of course, is nothing at all."

"We know the consequence of trying to be the world's policeman," Sasser said. "We have to avert the consequences of trying to be the world's bodyguard."

Senate Democratic leader Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia said he approved of the related policy of providing naval escorts to Kuwaiti oil-carrying vessels in the gulf.

"I think that is a good policy on its face," Byrd said. He did not discuss the plan to fly the U.S. flag on Kuwaiti vessels.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater told reporters traveling with President Reagan to Chattanooga, Tenn., for a high school commencement speech, of the "general agreement" with the Persian Gulf country.

"We see no reason to change those plans at this point," Fitzwater said.

A senior administration official, who demanded anonymity, said the discussions with Kuwait were moving toward an agreement in "the near future."

Phyllis Oakley, a State Department spokeswoman, said, "Our interests in the region are unchanged, as is the threat to neutral commercial shipment and to the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz."

Murphy told the House panel the administration does "not want the Soviet Union to obtain a strategic position from which it could threaten vital free-world interests in the region."

"We believe our arrangement will limit Soviet advances in the region," he said.

The Soviet Union has leased three tankers to the Kuwaitis, putting them under the protection of its flag. On May 6, a Soviet freighter was attacked by an unidentified patrol boat and hit by rocket fire.

Dole, in a Senate speech, also raised questions about why the the Stark and other U.S. ships were assigned to patrol the Persian Gulf.

"We need to rethink exactly what it is we are doing in the Persian Gulf," Dole said. "What are our goals? What is our strategy? What are the risks? And how much cost are we willing to pay?"

Dole said the most immediate goal is "to find out why this ship — equipped with some of our most modern and effective defensive weaponry — was not able to, or just did not, use any of it to defend itself."

The Stark was the first U.S. military vessel attacked in the gulf since U.S. ships first patrolled the area in 1949.