

Saudis denied request by U.S. to intercept warplane after attack

By Frank LoMonte

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WASHINGTON — Moments after an Iraqi fighter opened fire on the USS Stark in an attack that killed 37 crewmen, U.S. Air Force officials asked Saudi Arabian jets to intercept the fighter but were turned down, White House officials said yesterday.

Officials said the Iraqi plane got away while the pilots of two Saudi F-15 fighters waited for permission from their ground commander to force down the jet.

The two Saudi pilots "were anxious to proceed" but were called off at the last second by a ground controller who said he did not have authority to order the Iraqi jet intercepted, State Department spokesman Charles Redman said.

Pentagon officials are said to be angry at the Saudis' refusal to act, and several congressional leaders called for an investigation. But officials said they doubt even the quickest response could have averted the tragedy.

"I don't think there is anything at all that indicates the attack could have been prevented," Redman said at a news conference. "The request to do anything did not come until after the attack because nobody knew the jet was going to turn and fire."

Pentagon and State Department officials said they were unsure whether there would be any meetings between the United States and Saudi Arabia to discuss the response, or whether the incident would lead to changes in the mutual defense agreement between the two countries.

The Stark and its surviving crew members remained in port in Manama, Bahrain, yesterday while Pentagon officials tried to decide whether to repair the gaping hole in the frigate there or move the ship to another port.

Rep. Andy Ireland, R-Fla., said a House Armed Services subcommittee of which he is a member will hold hearings soon to determine why the attack occurred and why the crew was not better able to de-

fend itself.

Ireland said he thinks U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf have not been adequately alert to the dangers of traveling in that war-torn region, even though the United States is neutral in the Iran-Iraq war.

"I think, if you are going to be in a zone as heated as that, you cannot say that something was a mistake," Ireland said. "You ought to be prepared for mistakes."

But several military experts termed the Iraqi attack on the Stark a fluke, and said it did not suggest serious flaws in U.S. policy.

"I think this is just a one-of-a-kind combination of events," said retired Adm. Thomas Moorer, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "It's in no way indicative of the performance of the ship in a wartime effort."

Moorer said the commander and crew might have been unable to prevent the disaster, since it is possible for a small missile fired at a distance of 10 to 12 miles to evade radar until it is too late to take defensive action.

A senior policy adviser at the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies, Moorer said the attack suggests U.S. ships sailing in the perilous region should travel in pairs — not alone, as the Stark did.

Awakened to the danger posed to U.S. ships in the Middle East, congressional leaders questioned a Reagan administration plan to use U.S. warships to guard Kuwaiti oil tankers from attacks by Iran and to let the tankers fly the American flag to identify them as being under U.S. protection.

Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy told a House panel Tuesday that the program was necessary to protect vital U.S. interests in keeping the shipping channels open for oil transportation.

But Senate Democratic Leader Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., said he wants a thorough investigation into the safety of using U.S. ships to escort the oil tankers — an inquest that could delay administration plans to start the program by July.