

# The strange affair of the Yemeni Scud missiles

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In the midst of Washington's efforts to ratchet up its "weapons of mass destruction" rhetoric and establish a pretext for war against Iraq, a peculiar episode took place this week in the Arabian Sea.

On Monday, two Spanish warships, which form part of a US-led anti-terrorist naval task force, intercepted in international waters a North Korean freighter, the *So San*, heading towards the Middle East. According to Spanish and US officials, the ship, which was about 1,000km from the Horn of Africa, was unflagged, its identification markings had been painted over and it failed to stop when challenged.

The Spanish frigate *Navarra* fired three bursts of warning shots at the vessel. Snipers shot out cables crisscrossing the deck, enabling a helicopter to hover and land a boarding party of armed marines who seized the ship. A search uncovered 15 medium-range Scud missiles packed under bags of cement, along with conventional high explosive warheads and drums of fuel.

Spanish authorities immediately called in US military experts from the USS *Nassau*, conveniently located nearby, to deal with the explosives and the ship was handed over to the US navy. The events—the Spanish snipers, the landing party and the cargo packed under bags of cement—were all captured on film for timely media release. The story leaked out in Washington within hours.

The initial press coverage was cautious but nevertheless pointed in a definite direction. According to the unnamed US officials, the ship did not appear to be heading towards Iraq, but the ultimate destination of the missiles was unknown. "Some people would like to rule out Iraq, others do not want to rule out Iraq. Yemen has Scuds. We don't really know right now where this was going," one told the *New York Times*.

Here, it appeared, was the potential *casus belli* for a war against Iraq that the Bush administration has been

so desperate to establish. As the *New York Times* commented: "If Iraq had been the buyer, not only would confiscating the shipment have been legal under United Nations resolutions, but Iraq would also have been in material breach of those resolutions. The missiles would have given the United States grounds for war."

But the whole affair rapidly went awry when the Yemeni government claimed the Scud missiles and issued a formal protest to Washington on Wednesday demanding the ship's release. The purchase had been legal, it insisted, and the missiles were destined for the Yemeni army for defensive purposes. Following a flurry of phone calls involving US Vice President Richard Cheney and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Washington reluctantly decided to comply.

Clearly the White House was not pleased. As a senior official told the *New York Times*, Bush was "a very, very unhappy man" after deciding to let the freighter continue on its way. But the alternative was to alienate a Middle East regime, which has collaborated closely with the US military in hunting down Al Qaeda suspects and whose support, even if only tacit, would be needed in any US invasion of Iraq. In return, Yemen gave Washington face-saving guarantees to make no further purchases and to ensure that the Scuds remained in the hands of its army.

It was left to White House spokesmen Ari Fleischer to put the best possible spin on the incident. He stumbled his way through a story fraught with contradictions. Even though US intelligence had tracked the ship, he said, the Bush administration had not known its destination and was concerned that "it may have been heading for a nation that was a terrorist—a potential terrorist nation." Asked if that meant Iraq, he declared: "We had concern about where its ultimate destination might have been."

When pressed as to why military rather than

diplomatic means were used to ascertain the nature of the shipment, Fleischer insisted: “Until yesterday, we didn’t know what nation to talk to in terms of who was going to receive these. It may not have been Yemen. It turned out to be Yemen... Once we learned it was Yemen, we immediately talked to Yemen.”

Fleischer’s remarks include two bald-faced lies. Firstly, the US knew where the shipment was headed well in advance, and secondly, the Bush administration had contacted the Yemeni government prior to the interception of the So San.

On December 2—a full week before the ship was intercepted—the rightwing *Washington Times* published a story entitled “N. Korea ships fuel, missiles to Yemen”. Citing US intelligence officials, the article explained that the ship had been under surveillance since it left the port of Nampo in North Korea, that its destination was Yemen and its cargo included missile components and fuel.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* this week explained that “the US has been virtually certain since late November that the Yemenis were the buyers, after US intelligence discovered that Yemen had transferred a payment ‘in the millions’ of dollars to North Korea.” After the publication of the *Washington Times* article, US defence officials, “fearful of blowing the interdiction,” sounded out the Yemeni government, which indicated that it would deny any involvement.

“The US then concluded it would be able to seize the missiles at sea without Yemeni protest, allowing it to stop the shipment and avoid a public fight with a key ally in the war on terrorism,” the *Wall Street Journal* stated. The problem for the White House was that the Yemeni government reneged on the arrangement, publicly acknowledged the purchase and demanded the release of their goods.

If Yemen had done what was expected, Washington would have been able to point the finger at anyone they chose, and was already beginning to do so. As the *Wall Street Journal* noted: “Some administration hawks were hinting as late as Wednesday that Iraq might be the eventual purchaser—and administration spokesmen did little to correct that impression.”

When the provocation backfired, the White House went into damage control. An apology was issued to Spain where military officials were privately venting their anger to the media. To justify the boarding of the

So San, the rather threadbare explanation was offered that the ship was unflagged and therefore “stateless”.

The international media stepped in to help salvage the Bush administration from an embarrassing debacle. Stories, photographs and footage that seemed destined for sensational, front-page treatment moved quickly to the inside pages and down the news bulletins. References to possible Iraqi involvement were replaced by calls for tougher controls on missile sales and pro forma denunciations of North Korea. Now the matter has been all but dropped.

The willingness of the US administration to undertake what amounts to an act of piracy is a sharp warning of the desperate methods it is prepared to employ in obtaining a casus belli for war against Iraq. The So San incident is certainly not the only plot being hatched in Washington, nor will it be the last.



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