

# US navy fires on fishing vessel in Persian Gulf

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The killing of an Indian fisherman by a US navy ship in the Persian Gulf on Monday is a sign of sharp tensions as the US continues its military build-up in preparation for a possible attack on Iran.

USNS Rappahannock, a refuelling vessel, opened fire with its large calibre machine guns on a small fishing vessel about 16 kilometres off the United Arab Emirates (UAE) port of Jebel Ali. A US navy spokesman claimed that the vessel had “disregarded nonlethal warnings and rapidly approached the US ship.”

Shekar, 35, was killed on the spot. Three other fishermen from southern India were seriously injured—Sarvana was hit twice in the thigh; Muthu Muniraj was hit in the legs; and Muthu Kannan sustained wounds to the mouth and stomach. Two other men—UAE nationals—were uninjured.

Doubt has already been cast on US claims that the navy ship was responding to a threat. Sarvana told the Indian news channel Times Now on Tuesday that the US ship started shooting “without any warning.” He added: “We were shocked to come under attack like this. There was no time to react. We didn’t know what hit us.”

Muthu Muniraj told Reuters: “We had no warning at all from the ship. We were speeding up to try and go around them and then suddenly we got fired at. We know warning signs and sounds and there were none; it was very sudden. My friend was killed, he’s gone. I don’t understand what happened.”

An estimated four million Indians are part of the huge foreign cheap labour workforce in the Gulf states, largely employed as domestic servants, labourers and in

other menial jobs.

The incident is reminiscent of the lethal methods used by the US military on land in Iraq. Any vehicle or person deemed a “terrorist threat” to US personnel was fired on and killed. None of the US investigations into hundreds of such incidents, involving men, women and children, resulted in charges or disciplinary action.

The US response to Monday’s naval firing is similar: perfunctory condolences to the families of the dead and injured, but no admission of guilt. A US military investigation has been announced but will undoubtedly clear the personnel involved. A naval spokesman defended the crew’s actions, declaring: “Our ships have an inherent right to self-defence against lethal threats.”

Despite public anger in both the UAE and India over the incident, neither government has issued a diplomatic protest. Dubai’s police chief Dahi Khafan Tamim did note: “The primary investigation confirms that the [fishing] boat was in its right course and did not pose any danger. The shooting was clearly a mistake.”

The shooting clearly indicates that US naval crews in the Persian Gulf have been put on a heightened state of alert as the Obama administration ratchets up its confrontation against Iran. International diplomatic talks over Iran’s nuclear programs have all but broken down. From the beginning of the month, the US and the European Union, in what amounts to an act of economic warfare, have imposed harsh new sanctions against Iranian oil exports.

The Obama administration has repeatedly declared that it would use all means, including military force, to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Tehran

has denied any intention of constructing a nuclear bomb, rejecting unsubstantiated US claims.

However, the US military build-up in the Persian Gulf is continuing apace. Since the beginning of the year, the Pentagon has increased the number of aircraft carrier battle groups from one to two, doubled the number of minesweepers and moved a squadron of advanced F-22 fighters into the region. It announced on Monday that the USS John C. Stennis would be sent to the Gulf four months ahead of schedule to ensure the presence of two aircraft carriers at all times.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* on Tuesday, entitled “Pentagon bulks up defences in the Gulf,” provided details of a sophisticated missile defence radar station to be completed this month in Qatar. Along with similar sites in Israel and Turkey, the station will be able to track ballistic missile launches deep inside Iran. Qatar, a close American ally, already hosts the largest US military air base in the region, with 8,000 US troops.

The US military is seeking to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence missile interceptor system in the region in coming months, possibly in the UAE. A senior US defence official told the *Journal*: “There’s an effort to get it up and running as soon as possible.” He denied, however, that there was “some rush to be ready for imminent conflict.”

The Pentagon also announced a major minesweeping exercise involving 20 countries for mid-September in the Gulf. The International Mine Countermeasures Exercise 2012, the largest ever of its kind, is billed as focussing “on a hypothetical threat to mine the international waterways of the Middle East.”

Claims by the US that these steps are purely “defensive,” and not aimed at Iran, are simply not credible. In preparing for massive strikes on Iranian nuclear and military facilities, the Pentagon is strengthening its ability to neutralise any retaliation by Iran by launching missiles or mining the strategic Strait of Hormuz. The rapid build-up of “defensive” measures is another sign that the US is readying to wage an unprovoked war on Iran.

The Pentagon has applied to Congress for funds to reinforce the weaponry on US navy ships in the Gulf—including new laser target-trackers for machine guns and Griffin missiles that are specifically aimed at dealing with “hostile fast-attack craft.” Along with the hardware, the navy has obviously upgraded its rules of engagement, putting its warships on a hair-trigger to respond to alleged “threats.”

The deliberate US heightening of tensions in the Gulf not only sets the stage for further tragic incidents involving civilian deaths, but also for a maritime provocation against Iran that could be exploited as the pretext for war.



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