

'N Korean arms for Iran' seized by UAE

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The United Arab Emirates has seized a ship secretly carrying embargoed North Korean arms to Iran, say diplomats.

The interception comes at a sensitive time. North Korea has invited the US for bilateral talks on nuclear issues and the UN Security Council's western members are pressing for greater Iranian co-operation over its nuclear programme.

The UAE has reported the seizure of the vessel to the UN sanctions committee responsible for vetting the implementation of measures, including an arms embargo, imposed against North Korea under Security Council resolution 1874, according to diplomats in New York. The committee, chaired by Turkey, has made no formal announcement about the case.

Diplomats at the UN identified the vessel as the Bahamian-flagged ANL-Australia. The vessel was seized some weeks ago. The UN sanctions committee has written to the Iranian and North Korean governments pointing out that the shipment puts them in violation of UN resolution 1974.

Diplomats said the vessel was still being held in the UAE, where the authorities are understood to have found various forms of basic weaponry, including rocket-propelled grenades, which had been labelled as machine parts. It was up to the UAE to dispose of the cargo of weapons found on board and no further action by the committee was required, they said.

The UN resolution, adopted following North Korea's second nuclear test in May, extended an existing ban on the transfer of heavy weapons and nuclear and missile-related technology to cover all arms exports by Pyongyang.

The binding resolution authorises states to seize and dispose of items that break the embargo. The resolution also requires member states to report to the committee on what action they are taking to implement sanctions.

The UAE, especially the commercial centre of Dubai, is a key hub for goods moving in and out of Iran.

Western powers have pressed for greater co-operation from Dubai authorities to track shipments and monitor Iranian finances.

They have also more recently closed some companies that have been involved in allegedly exporting dual-use materials that could be used for nuclear technology or explosive devices found in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While most focus is on dual-use technology, diplomats said the recent clampdown on public dissent in the aftermath of Iran's contested elections had also raised concerns about supplies of regular arms to state-linked militias.

The UAE, a strong US ally, is also worried about Iran's nuclear ambitions but the seven-member federation plays a delicate balancing act as the Islamic republic is a big trading partner. Its close proximity also raises fears the UAE could become a potential target for Iranian retaliation against military action.

Dubai is host to more than 300,000 Iranian expatriates and attracts vast cash outflows from Iranians.

Financial Times, London, Aug. 28th 2009, World, online.