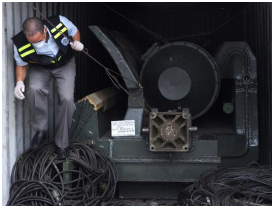


Seized North Korean ship sailed in wake of another

Oren Dorell, USA TODAY 4:51 p.m. EDT July 18, 2013



(Photo: Rodrigo Arangua, AFP/Getty Images)

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The United Nations is investigating whether Soviet-era weapons found hidden under sugar sacks in a cargo ship held at the Panama Canal violate U.N. sanctions on North Korea, which demanded the return of its ship and the "obsolete" weapons.

Analysts say the Chong Chon Gang is not the first North Korean vessel to sail to Cuba and cross the Panama Canal to its home port.

The ship, which departed in April from Vostochnyy, Russia, followed a similar route that another North Korean-flagged ship made just over a year ago, according to shipping security firm IHS Maritime.

In February 2012, the O Un Chong Nyon Ho left a Russian port and arrived at the Panama Canal in April, then spent 41 days in Cuba and returned to the canal. It was last seen heading for Nampho, North Korea, Richard Hurley, a senior analyst at IHS Maritime, said in a report sent to USA TODAY.

Hurley's analysis is based on satellite data and the ship's onboard Automatic Information System transmissions required by the International Maritime Organization, the U.N.'s oceans enforcement agency. Only five North Korean dry cargo vessels have made a similar trip since the beginning of 2010, IHS Maritime said.

"While it is not unusual for the small North Korean trading fleet to frequent other parts of the world, recent developments involving the Chong Chon Gang now place these previous journeys under more scrutiny," Hurley said.

An initial search of the recently seized ship's cargo hold revealed what appeared to be an old Soviet-made radar system for surface-to-air missiles capable of striking enemy jets at high altitudes. Panamanian workers have since labored to remove hundreds of sacks of sugar stacked on and around five shipping containers

Panama requested help searching the rest of the ship from the United Nations, which has imposed a weapons-transport ban on North Korea over its refusal to end its nuclear tests.

Morana Song, a spokeswoman for the U.N. secretary-general, told Bloomberg News that the U.N. will review whether the shipment violated a resolution prohibiting North Korea from selling or purchasing ballistic missiles, nuclear technology or combat aircraft.

Cuba's ministry of foreign affairs has said the Chong Chon Gang was loaded with 240 metric tons of cargo including nine missiles in parts and spares, two MiG-21 fighter jets and 15 jet engines, loaded with 10,000 pounds of sugar.

North Korea asked Panama to release the ship and its crew, but Panama's prosecutor, Javier Caraballo, instead charged the 35 crewmembers with endangering public security by illegally transporting war material, the BBC reported.

The ship's cargo violated the rules of transit through the Panama Canal and the cargo declaration, which did not list items that potentially constituted a violation of U.N. resolutions, Caraballo said.

"According to its declaration, the ship only carried 10,000 tons sugar; it never declared war material and that in itself is a violation of the rules and a grave danger for the transit through the Panama canal," Caraballo said.

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