

Source: Suspected NKorean ship changes course

By PAULINE JELINEK – 6 hours ago

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. officials said Tuesday that a North Korean ship has turned around and is headed back toward the north where it came from, after being tracked for more than a week by American Navy vessels on suspicion of carrying illegal weapons.

The move keeps the U.S. and the rest of the international community guessing: Where is the Kang Nam going? Does its cargo include materials banned by a new U.N. anti-proliferation resolution?

The ship left a North Korean port of Nampo on June 17 and is the first vessel monitored under U.N. sanctions that ban the regime from selling arms and nuclear-related material.

The Navy has been watching it — at times following it from a distance. It traveled south and southwest for more than a week; then, on Sunday, it turned around and headed back north, two U.S. officials said on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence.

Nearly two weeks after the ship left North Korea, officials said Tuesday they still don't know where it is going. But it was some 250 miles south of Hong Kong on Tuesday, one official said.

Though acknowledging all along that the Kang Nam's destination was unclear, some officials said last week that it could be going to Myanmar and that it was unclear whether it could reach there without stopping in another port to refuel.

The U.N. resolution allows the international community to ask for permission to board and search any suspect ship on the seas. If permission for inspection is refused, authorities can ask for an inspection in whichever nation where the ship pulls into port.

North Korea has said it would consider any interception of its ships a declaration of war.

Two officials had said earlier in the day Tuesday that the Kang Nam had been moving very slowly in recent days, something that could signal it was trying to conserve fuel.

They said they didn't know what the turnaround of the ship means, nor what prompted it.

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, said Sunday that Washington was "following the progress of that ship very closely," but she would not say whether the U.S. would confront the Kang Nam.

The sailing of the vessel — and efforts to track it — set up the first test of a new U.N. Security Council resolution that authorizes member states to inspect North Korean vessels. The sanctions are punishment for an underground nuclear test the North carried out in May in defiance of past resolutions.

Meanwhile on Tuesday, the Obama administration imposed financial sanctions on a company in Iran that is accused of involvement in North Korea's missile proliferation network.

In the latest move to keep pressure on Pyongyang and its nuclear ambitions, the Treasury Department moved against Hong Kong Electronics, a company located in Kish Island, Iran. The action means that any bank accounts or other financial assets found in the United States belonging to the company must be frozen. Americans also are prohibited from doing business with the firm.

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