

U.S. Considered Military Action on Pirated Ship

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NAIROBI, Kenya — The United States considered taking military action against a Ukrainian ship carrying tanks and anti-aircraft guns after it was hijacked by Somali pirates two years ago, according to a confidential cable.

Condoleezza Rice, who was then the secretary of state, cabled several U.S. embassies and asked them to make clear to host governments that Washington "reserves the right to take urgent action if necessary" to keep the weapons from the hands of Islamist militants in Somalia.

The United States has rarely used military action after a vessel is seized because it could endanger the hostages. The newly leaked cables show how desperate the administration of former President George W. Bush was to prevent the arms from being diverted to Somalia.

Somali pirates hijacked the MV Faina off East Africa in September 2008 while it was en route to Kenya with weapons bound for Southern Sudan.

In a cable sent by Rice two days after the hijacking, U.S. diplomats in Ukraine, Russia, Latvia and Kenya were asked to gather those countries' views "with respect to possible United States military action to prevent the hijackers from delivering the Faina's cargo into Somalia."

"Such intervention could include disabling fire against the vessel or equipment being used to offload" it, said the cable, which was released Friday on the web site WikiLeaks.

The U.S. Embassy in Nairobi said it would not comment on any of the WikiLeaks documents.

The Faina was carrying 33 tanks, 42 anti-aircraft guns, 36 rocket-propelled grenades, six rocket launchers and 13,000 125mm rounds of ammunition, the cable said. The hijacked crew included 17 Ukrainians, three Russians and a Latvian.

The cable said the United States was deeply concerned that the weapons could end up in the hands of al-Shabab, Somalia's most dangerous militant group.

Rice said the United States was concerned for the 21 crew and that military action would be a last resort. If the pirates "simply hold the vessel for ransom, as they have in the past, we would not intervene in this manner," she added.

The Ukrainian government said then it was against using force in the dispute, but as a matter of policy it would not negotiate with what it labeled terrorists.

Military intervention in pirate-hostage situations is rare because of the risk to hostages. In an April 2009 incident, French navy commandos stormed a pirate-held sailboat, the Tanit, in a shootout at sea that killed two pirates and one French hostage. The operation freed four French citizens.

Only days later Navy SEAL snipers shot three Somali pirates in a lifeboat in order to rescue Richard Phillips, the hostage captain of the U.S.-flagged Maersk Alabama. Phillips was not harmed.

International militaries have boarded more hijacked ships over the last year, but that usually only happens when they are certain the crew is safe, such as when they are locked in an attack-proof safe room.

The pirates released the Faina in February 2009 after getting a \$3.2 million ransom. The payment ended a four-month standoff that brought U.S. and Russian warships together off the Somali coast.

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