

After Syria Stop, Ship Surfaces Near Turkey

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A Russian ship suspected of delivering munitions to Syria in violation of an EU arms embargo after an unscheduled stop in Cyprus has anchored off Turkey's coast.

Foreign Ministry official Selcuk Unal said Turkish coast guard and customs officials would board the Chariot before allowing it to dock at the port of Iskenderun.

Unal said the ship left the Syrian port of Tartus early Saturday and reached Iskenderun later the same day. He said the ship's captain confirmed that the ship had arrived from Syria. But it was unclear what type of cargo the St. Vincent and Grenadines-flagged ship may have offloaded at Tartus.

The Chariot initially made its way to the Cypriot port of Limassol on Tuesday after running low on fuel because of rough seas. Its arrival at the European Union member country meant the vessel would be subject to the embargo the bloc imposed to protest Syria's crackdown on the uprising against President Bashar Assad's rule.

Customs officials inspecting the vessel found that it was carrying "dangerous cargo" inside four containers that Finance Minister Kikis Kazamias said was of a type that necessitated its seizure under EU embargo rules.

A Cypriot official, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue, said the containers carried a shipment of bullets.

But Cypriot authorities allowed it to leave Wednesday after the ship's owners, St. Petersburg-based Westberg, said it would head to Turkey instead of Syria.

The ship then vanished off radar screens after apparently switching off its Automatic Identification System, or AIS, that enables the vessel to be tracked.

Turkey, citing navy intelligence, said the ship made its way to Tartus after leaving Cyprus.

A Westberg official said the company had done nothing wrong because no Russian law prevented the delivery from being made at Tartus, where Russia maintains a naval base.

"The ship went to Syria as there was nothing illegal in reaching its originally intended destination," he said by telephone on condition of anonymity.

Rosoboronexport spokesman Vyacheslav Davidenko said the arms exporter would neither confirm nor deny the report. "We do not comment on where our deliveries go, when they leave port or how," he said.

U.S. officials said Friday that they had expressed concerns to both Russia and Cyprus.

Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the United States was "continuing to seek clarification" about the ship and its cargo.

But Cyprus government spokesman Stefanos Stefanou on Saturday repeated that authorities "acted in accordance with EU regulations" and that no one from either the EU or elsewhere has raised any questions about the government's handling of the matter.

Arms-trafficking expert Hugh Griffiths said he has been monitoring the Chariot — a purpose-built ship to carry dangerous cargoes such as ammunition, explosives and missiles — which has a history of delivering arms to sensitive destinations in the Middle East and Africa. He said ships switching off their AIS is "standard operating procedure" for ships involved in drug trafficking and clandestine arms shipments.

(AP, Reuters)

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