

Helms Flies To Persian Gulf States

12-3-74

By Jim Hoagland
Washington Post Staff Writer

MUSCAT, Oman, Dec. 2—Richard Helms, U.S. ambassador to Iran and former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, left Oman today after an unannounced one-day visit to this strategically located Persian Gulf country.

American Embassy officials reluctantly confirmed Helms' arrival here in an American military aircraft. His visit was described as a routine stop on a "familiarization" visit to Arab countries on the Persian Gulf.

He was accompanied by senior members of the American military mission in Tehran. Helms left this afternoon for Bahrain and a return to Iran Tuesday. His previous stops in the Gulf included Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, and Saudi Arabia.

Helms met with Sultan Qaboos here today in the southern coastal town of Salalah during his brief visit.

His visit comes at a time of heightened diplomatic and military activity in the Gulf. Oman and Iran share land control of the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 million barrels of oil a day passes in tankers.

(The defense programs of the Persian Gulf states are insufficient to meet potential threats, according to the foreign minister of Bahrain, quoted today in the Beirut daily, An Nahar. Sheikh Mohamed Bin Mubarak Khalifa told the newspaper that Iran was not the only threat. He suggested that the Gulf states develop a united defense strategy and urged the Arab world to "help us achieve this coordination.")

Oman has had more than 1,200 paratroopers stationed in Oman for the past year helping the forces of Oman's Sultan Qaboos fight communist-backed guerrillas in the Dhofar Province around Salalah. Oman announced in October that the Iranian troops would

be returning home soon because their mission has been accomplished, but it is still not clear if this is only a rotation with new Iranian troops coming in.

Because of his intelligence background and his posting to Iran, a visit by Helms here could be turned into a propaganda issue by radical Arab states who support the Dhofar rebels, known as the popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (P.F.L.O.).

William Colby, who now holds Helms' former position as director of the CIA, was reported to have visited the Middle East last month and it is thought that one of his stops was the Gulf region. His itinerary has been kept secret.

The Dhofar guerrillas are backed by neighboring South Yemen, the Soviet Union and to some extent by Iraq, which has engaged in intermittent border warfare with Iran over the past few years. Iran, a non-Arab Moslem country, is supporting the Kurdish rebellion in northeastern Iraq.

An Iraqi naval force consisting of two minesweepers and two guided-missile carriers last month toured Arab sheikhdoms along the Gulf but did not come through the Strait of Hormuz for call in Oman.

The U.S. aircraft carrier Constellation and two escorting guided-missile destroyers left the Gulf last week after unusual "familiarization" voyage. The Pentagon said it was the first trip since 1948 by a U.S. carrier into the Gulf.

British warships routinely call at Muscat about once every three months. British soldiers on contract to the Oman government and assigned here by the British government advise and fight with the Sultan's army in Dhofar.

France, which established full diplomatic relations with Oman this year, has sent ships on quarterly visits for the past nine months from the French-held port of Djibouti in East Africa, according to Western sources here.

Arab rulers of the area are due to gather in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, this week for a Gulf summit meeting. Iran's Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, has been improving his country's relations with the traditional rulers of the Persian Gulf, who were angered at his seizure of three small islands off the coast of the United Arab Emirates in 1971.