

Libyan Jets Fire on U.S. Spy Plane

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An Air Force C-130 plane used on electronic intelligence missions was reported fired upon by two Libyan jet fighters over the Mediterranean yesterday. The incident brought an immediate strong American protest.

Secretary of State William P. Rogers personally called in Libya's charge d'affaires here to demand what a spokesman called "an investigation of, and an accounting for, this unpardonable incident."

The relatively slow-flying, American four-engine propeller aircraft was "83 miles off the Libyan coast, roughly south of Malta," and in "international airspace" when "fired on," said State Department spokesman Charles W. Bray. The lumbering American plane reportedly eluded the supersonic French-built Mirage jets by ducking into the clouds, and landed at Athens unharmed.

The incident may impair U.S. relations with the volatile Libyan revolutionary regime of Col. Muammar Qaddafi.

Bray refused to discuss "the nature of the mission," nor would he confirm or deny that the aircraft was on an electronic intelligence-gathering assignment. That was acknowledged by American military sources. When converted to so-called "spy plane" use for ELINT, or electronic intelligence missions, the Hercules

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planes are described as EC-130 aircraft.

To all questions about the plane's mission, Bray said only that "It was an unarmed military aircraft on a military mission," without further amplification.

In other words, the United States takes the official position that no matter what the plane's mission was, it was unjustifiedly fired upon over international waters. "The legalities of this should be quite clear," said Bray, "... well beyond a shadow of a doubt." The plane had "clear U.S. markings," said Bray, and it was fired on by machine guns, in an "unprovoked" attack.

The U.S. charge d'affaires in Tripoli, Harold Josif, was instructed to deliver a protest to the Libyan government that paralleled Rogers' protest here to Libyan charge Muharan Ben Musa.

In Tripoli a Libyan spokesman initially said he had no knowledge of the incident.

No detailed explanation was immediately available about the whole encounter between the C-130, which has a speed of about 335 mph, and the Libyan Mirages, which fly at more than twice that speed. Military sources here said the two Libyan jets made an "identification" pass at the American plane before firing at it.

Bray, when asked if the American plane ever got closer than 83 miles to the Libyan coast, said "I don't believe so."

The U.S. plane was reportedly based at Athens, where it returned, which may evoke further international complications. It is well known, although officials generally avoid discussing the fact, that American electronic intelligence planes regularly fly missions over the Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean, to check on radar frequencies and gather other information. EC-130s also have been used in Vietnam as flying command posts for air strikes.

There has been apprehension in the Middle East about further air incidents since Israeli jets on Feb. 21 brought down a Libyan airliner, killing 106 aboard. The Libyan plane had penetrated Israeli airspace, with the pilot apparently lost and believing he was over Egypt.

Egypt was reported to have

worked behind the scenes to restrain the 31-year-old Qaddafi from taking any retaliatory action. Immediately after that tragedy, there were reports and speculation that Libya's air force was patrolling the Mediterranean, seeking to intercept Israeli El Al airliners, or even, according to one report, U.S. aircraft.

The subsequent killing of three diplomats, including two high-ranking American officials, in Sudan on March 2 by guerrillas of the Black September movement, further heightened the tension. Libya has been a militant supporter of the Palestine guerrilla groups.

The United States was a major supporter of Libya prior to the 1969 revolution that brought Qaddafi to power, and that relationship with Libya's monarchy kept Libya from breaking relations with the United States over the 1967 Arab-Israel war.

After Qaddafi came to power, the United States had to withdraw from its extensive air base, Wheelus, in Libya. At present there are about 3,000 Americans in Libya, mainly working for oil companies there. Libya is a principal supplier of oil for Western Europe, and any major outbreak of tension between the United States and Libya could endanger the American presence there, and perhaps the oil supply also.

Libya's air force still has some American planes, including C-130 and C-47 transports, but its primary air force strength is in French-built Mirage III jet fighters, with 110 or order and about 45 delivered on order and about 45 delivered so far.