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SFChronicle U.S. Warns Cuba on Sea Attacks

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The Government warned Cuba yesterday that it will protect American citizens from attacks similar to those Cuba made on two freighters this month. The Pentagon indicated U.S. naval and air units are being alerted.

The State Department said the "Government is prepared to take all measures under international law to protect U.S. citizens and freedom of the seas" in the Caribbean area.

Shortly afterwards, the Pentagon said, "we have initiated certain precautionary measures so that the Department of Defense would be prepared, if necessary, to carry out policies expressed in the statement issued by the State Department."

Pentagon spokesman Daniel Z. Henkin declined to go into specifics, but Defense Department sources made clear that air and naval units are being put on alert. There was no immediate word of any actual ship or plane movements.

THREATS

State Department spokesmen Robert J. McCloskey said "the United States government considers these armed attacks upon commercial vessels... to constitute a clear and present threat to the freedom of navigation and commerce in the Caribbean and a threat to American citizens."

"Such threats are intolerable," he added.

The United States has jet fighter units and warships based in such places as Cherry Point, N.C., Jacksonville, Fla., and the Guantanamo Naval Base on the eastern tip of Cuba.

McCloskey would not elaborate on the exact meaning of his statement, but he indicated this could mean sending aid to any American vessel reported under attack.

He also said that if requested by another government the United States would also come to the aid of a foreign-registered ship if it too were attacked.

In reading his prepared statement, McCloskey pointed to the seizure by Cuba in

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the last two weeks of two Panamanian-registered vessels, the Lyla Express and the Johnny Express. The Cubans seized the Lyla Express December 5 and its sister ship December 15, claiming both had engaged in carrying arms and anti-Cuban agents.

Meanwhile Cuba said it would not "take a single backward step" and that President Nixon's demand for the release of a captive American sea captain would be "flatly rejected."

Havana Radio, quoting an editorial in the govern-controlled newspaper, Granma, gave its answer to the Nixon demand in a broadcast monitored here.

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President Nixon met Thursday with the wife and children of Captain Jose Villa, 55, skipper of the Johnny Express, which was strafed and seized by two Cuban gunboats in international waters Wednesday about 120 miles off Cuba.

Although the 235-foot ship is of Panamanian registry, Villa is a naturalized U.S. citizen. There were 13 other crewmen aboard and several of them, including Villa, apparently were wounded in the machinegun and hand grenade attack.

'PIRATE'

The Castro government claimed the 1400-ton vessel was a "pirate ship," being used by the Central Intelligence Agency.

When asked to comment on these charges, McCloskey said "I can assure you neither vessel has any connection with the United States government." He added that neither ship was carrying arms or agents to Cuba.

McCloskey called the attack and seizure of the two

vessels a clear violation of international law and condemned the Havana government's reported declaration that it intends to continue such attacks and seizures.

McCloskey added he had no more information on the condition of Villa.

The United States has demanded a repatriation of Villa, but McCloskey said Cuba has not responded.

The State Department spokesman said he has no exact figures on the number of crewmen from the two vessels now being held by Cuba, but he said he believes the total is more than 20.