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SOVIET SHIPS NEAR CUBAN PORT AGAIN

U.S. Says Vessels Linked to Base Report Are in Area

WASHINGTON, Nov. 9 (UPI) — The Pentagon said today that two Soviet ships that entered the Cuban port of Cienfuegos in September, giving rise to speculation about construction of a submarine base, were again nearing the port after a six-week absence.

Jerry W. Friedheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, said the submarine tender and salvage tug were being followed by the American destroyer escort Kretchmer and also watched by U-2 reconnaissance planes.

He declined to add any new details to earlier comments by defense officials that some sort of construction was apparently under way at Cienfuegos. Speculation that a base might be under construction has been denied by Tass, Soviet press agency.

Mr. Friedheim said it was not definite at this time that the two ships were returning to Cienfuegos, although their course apparently would take them there.

"We don't know what their intentions are, any more than we've known all along," he said. "They are in the vicinity of Cienfuegos. They are within a day of it. They are still in international waters."

Mr. Friedheim confirmed that two Soviet barges that had been at Cienfuegos since September were still there and that American U-2 planes were keeping the port under close surveillance.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss activity at Cienfuegos harbor any more than I have been over the last couple of weeks," he added.

Tug, Tender

Cuba 'Sub Base' Ships Are Back

Washington

Two Soviet ships which the United States has said may have been engaged in a submarine base construction project in Cuba are back again, the Pentagon said yesterday.

A Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, said the two vessels—a submarine tender and a salvage tug—are in the general vicinity of Cienfuegos.

Cienfuegos, a deep-water port on Cuba's southern coast, is where the Nixon administration said the Russians might be constructing a sub base.

SHADOWED

Friedheim said the ships, shadowed by U.S. aircraft and the destroyer Kretchmer, were within a day's steaming time of the harbor.

When asked by reporters if the ships' return heightened U.S. concern, he replied: "I wouldn't want to characterize any concern, I'm just advising where they are."

When the two ships left Cienfuegos on October 13, the Pentagon said the departure made it seem less likely the Russians were building a base there.

Last week, Herbert Klein, President Nixon's director of communications, announced that construction had halted at Cienfuegos after the Administration applied "strong but quiet diplomacy."

The Russians repeatedly denied the U.S. contentions.

Friedheim declined to comment when asked whether construction activity is continuing.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss specifics at Cienfuegos harbor today any more than I have been for the past several weeks," he said.

SECRET

There were reports last month of a secret understanding between Moscow and Washington in which the Russians reportedly agreed to stop their activities at Cienfuegos, but the reports were never confirmed publicly.

The issue of the sub base was first raised September 25 when the Pentagon said it had evidence of what appeared to be construction of a submarine support facility at the Cuban port.

Since leaving Cienfuegos, October 13, the sub tender and tug spent several days at Mariel, a port on Cuba's northern coast near Havana. The ships left Mariel last week and sailed around Cuba.

Associated Press