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Russian Sub Tender That Stirred Capital Quits Cuban Waters

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 8—Four Soviet naval vessels, including a submarine tender whose arrival at Cienfuegos, Cuba, alarmed official Washington last fall, have reportedly left Cuba, apparently on their way home.

The tender and a diesel-powered submarine were reported in the mid-Atlantic today moving northeast, while a guided-missile frigate and an oiler were in the English Channel, having left Cuba earlier this week, Jerry W. Friedheim, a Defense Department spokesman, announced.

Two Soviet barges and a tug that arrived in Cuba last September, remained at Cienfuegos, he added.

The importance of the tender, a 9,000-ton vessel, is that she is presumably equipped to service Soviet nuclear-powered missile-carrying submarines with spare parts and repairs.

Pentagon officials said privately that the tender's departure, along with the other vessels, might signify that the basis was disappearing for fear that the Soviet Union might be

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establishing a base for nuclear submarines in Cuba.

They refrained, however, from drawing any conclusions. The State Department declined comment, saying that it was leaving the subject entirely to the Pentagon.

Mr. Friedheim conceded that there had been a delay in making public the departure of the Soviet vessels from Cuba but declined to explain it. It seemed likely that Pentagon officials wanted to be quite sure the ships really were going home, and not just "harbor-hopping," as Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird put it recently.

Soviet tactics in recent months in the Caribbean, where they have moved ships in and out of Cuban ports in what seemed an arbitrary fashion, have been interpreted by some observers as an assertion of the Soviet right to have ships there, and a test of United States determination to prevent establishment of a submarine base in Cuba.

The submarine tender that

disturbed United States officials arrived at Cienfuegos on Sept. 25.

Previously two Soviet barges of a type that could be used for storing radioactive waste had arrived at Cienfuegos, where the Russians, or the Cubans, have constructed two barracks, each capable of accommodating about 100 men, plus a football field and a communications center.

This information and subsequent reports of the comings and goings of the Soviet vessels were obtained mainly from U-2 reconnaissance flights, according to the Pentagon.

On Sept. 25, the day the tender arrived, a White House spokesman said:

"The Soviet Union can be under no doubt that we would view the establishment of a strategic base in the Caribbean with the utmost seriousness."

The spokesman later said that the same view applied to "servicing of Soviet vessels armed with offensive weapons in or from bases in Cuba."

The word "bases" was understood to include tenders in the Caribbean.