

Navy Sends Carrier to Indian Ocean

Washington

The United States moved a carrier task force toward the Indian Ocean yesterday in what the Pentagon first suggested was a response to a Soviet naval buildup in the Mediterranean but then insisted was a periodic demonstration of naval power.

The Defense Department announced that the attack carrier Hancock, accompanied by five destroyers and a tanker, is moving through the Strait of Malacca, which separates Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. The force is scheduled to be in the Indian Ocean within a day.

The present destination of the force is the Persian Gulf area, although officials field out the possibility that orders could be changed.

The Hancock had been with the Seventh Fleet in the western Pacific. Why the U.S. was sending it to the Persian Gulf at a time when the Middle East crisis seemed to be abating was not completely explained by the Defense Department. Moreover, in contrast to the normal secrecy surrounding naval movements, the Pentagon volunteered that the Hancock had been dispatched.

EXPLANATIONS

Under questioning from reporters, Pentagon spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim first linked the movement of the carrier task force to the alert of American forces last week and to a continuing buildup of the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean.

But several hours later,

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after news reports described the movement of the force as a response to the Soviet buildup, Friedheim said there was no connection with Soviet naval activities in the Mediterranean. Rather, he said, the U.S. was sending the Hancock into the Indian Ocean only "to demonstrate we can operate there."

In recent years, the U.S. has periodically sent carriers into the Indian Ocean, largely to "show the flag" and demonstrate the ability to move naval forces into the region.

The worldwide alert was issued to U.S. forces early Thursday morning, when the administration expressed concern that the Soviet Union was about to send a military force to Egypt.

Then, according to Defense officials, it was thought it would be useful in extending the military choices for the U.S. if there was a carrier on the southern flank of the Middle East, close to the oil-producing Arab nations.

The carrier would have been in a position to help protect the sea lanes leading out the Persian Gulf, as well as to support any air operations of the American carriers in the Mediterranean.

As part of the alert, therefore, the Hancock, one of the older carriers, was ordered to the Indian Ocean. That alert has now been relaxed for most U.S. forces as the Administration concluded that the threat of Soviet intervention had abated with the establishment of a UN peace-keeping force in the Middle East.

Only the Atlantic and European commands, composed of about 350,000 men, remain in readiness.

Some question remains about the alert status of Soviet airborne forces; reports of their movement toward readiness on October 11 prompted concern that the Soviet Union was considering intervention. Friedheim had no comment yesterday when asked whether these forces are still on alert.

As the Soviet threat receded, Defense officials again began to emphasize their concern over the buildup of the Soviet navy in the Mediterranean. Asked why it was necessary to send the Hancock to the Indian Ocean now that the alert has been relaxed, Friedheim pointed to the Soviet naval buildup.

At the height of the crisis last week, the Defense Department placed the size of the Soviet Mediterranean fleet — which normally runs between 50 and 60 ships — at 85. Yesterday Friedheim put the number at around 90, including a guided missile cruiser and two guided missile destroyers that moved through the Bosphorous into the Aegean Sea.

The U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, which normally runs between 40 and 50 ships, now totals 60, including three carriers.

Friedheim said that no unusual Soviet naval activity in the Indian Ocean was related to the ordering of the Hancock to the Persian Gulf area. He said there was the "normal" Soviet fleet in the Indian Ocean — about 20 ships, more than half research and support vessels.

-New York Times