

Iran seizes another oil tanker smuggling fuel



Tehran, August 4 (RHC)-- Iranian Revolutionary Guards seized a foreign oil tanker in the Gulf that was smuggling fuel and detained seven crewmen, Iran's state media reported Sunday, in a show of power amid heightened tension with the West.

The vessel was intercepted near Iran's Farsi Island in the Gulf, Iran's semi-official Fars news agency said. The elite Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has a navy base on Farsi island which is located north of the Strait of Hormuz.

"The IRGC's naval forces have seized a foreign oil tanker in the Persian Gulf that was smuggling fuel for some Arab countries," state television quoted the Guards commander Ramezan Zirahi as saying.

It was carrying 700,000 liters of fuel, he said, without elaborating on the nationalities of the detained crewmen and on which country or company owned the ship. "The seizure of the oil tanker was in coordination with Iran's judiciary authorities and based on their order," Fars quoted him as saying. "It was taken to the Bushehr port, where its fuel was handed over to the authorities."

Iran, which has some of the world's cheapest fuel prices due to heavy state subsidies and the fall of its currency, has been fighting rampant fuel smuggling by land to neighboring countries and by sea to Gulf Arab states. Another oil tanker, the Panama-flagged MT Riah, was captured by the elite force last month

for "smuggling fuel to other countries."

Tensions have risen between Iran and the West since last year when the United States pulled out of an international agreement which curbed the Islamic Republic's nuclear program in return for an easing of economic sanctions on Iran.

Fuelling fears of a Middle East war with global repercussions, the Guards seized British tanker Stena Impero near the Strait of Hormuz in July for alleged marine violations, two weeks after British forces captured an Iranian oil tanker near Gibraltar accused of violating sanctions on Syria.

Describing the seizure of the Stena Impero in the Strait as illegal, Britain has rejected the idea that it could release the Iranian tanker in exchange for the British-flagged vessel.

Angered by intensified U.S. sanctions designed to strangle its vital oil trade and the failure of Britain and European parties to the agreement to salvage the pact, Tehran has decreased its commitments to the nuclear deal.

Iran also has threatened to block all exports through the Strait, if countries heed U.S. calls to stop buying Iranian oil. A fifth of global oil consumption passes through the Strait from Middle East crude producers to major markets.

After several attacks in May and June on oil tankers - blamed by Washington on Tehran, which denied responsibility - Trump has been trying to forge a military coalition to secure Gulf waters, though European allies have been loath to join for fear of provoking open conflict.

European parties to the deal - Britain, France and Germany - have instead appealed for diplomatic moves to defuse the crisis and have been trying to salvage the pact by exploring ways to shield Iran's economy from U.S. sanctions.

In an apparent bid to calm tensions in the Gulf, Iran has called for improving relations with its regional rivals Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Last month, Iran and the UAE revived maritime security talks in Tehran that had been off since 2013. Iranian media reported on Sunday that Iranian and Qatari coast guards will meet to "improve maritime and border cooperation."

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