

Navy sailors released unharmed by Iran

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — It turned out to be the international crisis that wasn't.

Less than a day after 10 U.S. Navy sailors were detained in Iran when their boats drifted into Iranian waters, they and their vessels were back safely Wednesday with the American fleet.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry tapped the personal relationship he has formed with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in the three years of negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, speaking with him at least five times by telephone. Kerry credited the quick resolution to the "critical role diplomacy plays in keeping our country secure and strong."

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter thanked Kerry after the sailors' release and couched the incident in humanitarian terms, noting that "the U.S. Navy routinely provides assistance to foreign sailors in distress."

For Tehran, the Americans' swift release was a way to neutralize a potential new flashpoint days before it was expected to meet the terms of last summer's nuclear deal, which will give Iran significant relief from painful economic sanctions.

It is likely that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say on all matters of state, would have had to approve the release, given the immense political sensitivities.

But the rapid resolution also was a victory for moderate President Hassan Rouhani, who has promoted greater openness with the outside world despite strident opposition from deeply entrenched hard-liners at home.

"Rouhani's policy of interaction is working," said Iranian political analyst Saeed Leilaz. "Iran and the U.S. have gone a long way in reducing tensions but still have a long way to go in improving their contacts. It was a big step forward."

The nine men and one woman were detained Tuesday after at least one of their boats suffered mechanical problems off of Farsi Island, an outpost in the middle of the Persian Gulf that has been used as a base for Revolutionary



This frame grab from a Tuesday video by the Iranian state-run IRIB News Agency, shows detention of American Navy sailors by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the Persian Gulf, Iran.

Guard speedboats since the 1980s. The Americans' small Riverine boats were sailing between Kuwait and Bahrain on a training mission when the U.S. lost contact.

The sailors left the island at 0843 GMT (3:43 a.m. EST) Wednesday aboard their boats, the Navy said. They were picked up by Navy aircraft, and other sailors took control of the vessels for the return voyage to Bahrain, where the U.S. 5th Fleet is based.

Cmdr. Kevin Stephens, a 5th Fleet spokesman, said the priority now would be determining "how exactly these sailors found themselves in Iran."

He declined to say where they were going or give details on their identities, but a senior defense official said they were heading to a U.S. military facility in Qatar. The official, who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly, said they are being debriefed and getting medical exams but were not harmed.

In Washington, a defense official said the Navy has ruled out engine or propulsion failure as the reason the boats entered Iranian waters. Navigation problems, due either to human or mechanical failure, could not be ruled out, said the official, who was not authorized to discuss details of the incident and so spoke on condition of anonymity.

The sailors were part of Riverine Squadron 1, based in San Diego, U.S. officials said. When the U.S. lost contact with the boats, ships attached to the USS Harry S Truman aircraft carrier strike group began a search, as did aircraft from the Truman. The officials also spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the incident publicly.

The Revolutionary Guard released images of the U.S. sailors before their release, showing them sitting on the floor of a room. They looked mostly bored or annoyed, although one appeared to be smiling. The woman had her hair covered by a brown cloth. The pictures also showed what appeared to be their two boats.

State TV later released more video and photos of the Americans apparently surrendering on their knees, their hands behind their head. It also showed machine guns and ammunition they had onboard.

"After determining that their entry into Iran's territorial waters was not intentional, and their apology, the detained American sailors were released in international waters," the Guard said.

US Navy Cmdr. Gary Ross, a Pentagon spokesman, said the incident remained under investigation.

Republican Party begins preparing for contested convention

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, S.C. — The Republican National Committee has started preparing for a contested national convention, which would follow the primary season should no GOP candidate for president win enough delegates to secure the party's nomination.

While calling the need for such plans ultimately unlikely, several GOP leaders at the party's winter meeting in South Carolina told The Associated Press on Wednesday that such preliminary planning is nonetheless actively underway.

They stressed it had little to do with concerns about the candidacy of billionaire businessman Donald Trump, describing the early work instead as a necessary contingency given the deeply divided Republican field.

With less than three weeks to go before the Feb. 1 leadoff Iowa caucuses, there are still a dozen major Republican candidates in the race.

"Certainly, management of the committee has been working on the eventuality, because we'd be wrong not to," said Bruce Ash, chairman of the RNC's rules committee. "We don't know, or we don't think there's going to be a contested convention, but if there is, obviously everybody needs to know what all those logistics are going to look like."

The RNC will hold a briefing outlining possible scenarios with party officials and the presidential campaigns on Thursday, said Steve Duprey, a Republican national committeeman from New Hampshire.

Discussion is expected to focus on logistics related to planning for the July convention in Cleveland, a task traditionally controlled by the presumptive nominee.

"I never thought we'd deal with this," Duprey said. "The best way to make sure we don't have some messy fight is if all the campaigns

understand the rules and all the members of the RNC understand how this would play out going forward."

Added South Carolina GOP chairman Matt Moore: "The story of this election cycle has been 'expect the unexpected.' So we're getting ahead of it and preparing for every single scenario at the national convention. I don't think it's likely, but it's certainly possible. And you always plan for things that are possible."

To win the nomination outright, a successful candidate needs to secure more than half of all available delegates in the state-by-state primary contests leading up to the convention.

The last time a Republican convention opened without such a clear nominee was 1976, when Gerald Ford led in delegates but lacked a majority coming into the convention. There was plenty of drama as Ford beat back a challenge from Ronald Reagan and eked out the nomination on the first vote.

The last time there was a truly brokered convention, at which delegates turned to someone who didn't run in the primaries, was in 1952. That year, Democrats drafted Adlai Stevenson, who won the party's nomination on the third ballot.

In the GOP field this year, Trump and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz have the edge in the most recent preference polls, much to the dismay of many party leaders who fear neither man is electable in a general election. The centrist wing of the party has yet to coalesce around an alternative to Trump or Cruz. Those fighting for that role include Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and Ohio Gov. John Kasich.

While party leaders caution they don't believe a clear nominee will fail to emerge from the glut of candidates, they argue it would be malpractice not to prepare for the prospect.

High court raises doubts over Puerto Rico sovereignty

By SAM HANANEL
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Wednesday raised doubts about whether Puerto Rico should be treated as a sovereign state with powers that go beyond its status as a territory of the United States.

The justices considered the question during arguments in a criminal case involving two men who claim that Puerto Rico and the federal government can't prosecute them for the same charges of selling weapons without a permit.

The double jeopardy principal prevents defendants from being tried twice for the same offense. But there is an exception that allows prosecution under similar state and federal laws, since states are considered separate sovereigns.

Several justices said Puerto Rico's power to enforce local laws really comes from Congress, which in theory could take it away.

The case has broad political and legal implications that could affect Puerto Rico on issues ranging from taxation and bankruptcy to federal benefits. It comes as the high court prepares to hear a separate dispute later this year over whether the financially struggling Puerto Rican government can give its municipalities the power to declare bankruptcy.

The Caribbean island of 3.5 million people is a U.S. territory acquired in 1898 following the Spanish-American War. But it gained a measure of autonomy in 1952, when it adopted its own constitution with the approval of

"Before 1952, Congress could veto Puerto Rico's laws. It has relinquished that right."

— Sonia Sotomayor, U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Congress and was allowed to pass its own local laws.

Justice Elena Kagan said that history means the ultimate source of the island's legal power is Congress.

"If Congress is in the driver's seat, why isn't Congress the sole source of authority?" she asked Christopher Landau, the lawyer representing Puerto Rico.

Landau said that under Puerto Rico's constitution "the political power of the commonwealth emanates from the people." He said Congress had essentially relinquished control over Puerto Rico's internal affairs when it allowed the island to create its own laws and government.

But Justice Antonin Scalia said that doesn't mean Congress couldn't change the law.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the daughter of Puerto Rico-born parents, seemed sympathetic to the argument that Congress meant to confer sovereignty when it approved the island's constitution — even if Puerto Rico is not quite equivalent to a state.

"Before 1952, Congress could veto Puerto Rico's laws," Sotomayor said. "It has relinquished that right."

The case involves Luis Sanchez Valle and James Gomez Vazquez, who pleaded guilty in federal court to selling illegal firearms. When Puerto Rican

officials later charged them under local laws, they moved to dismiss the charges on double jeopardy grounds.

The Puerto Rico Supreme Court ultimately sided with the men, ruling that the island is not a separate sovereign.

Arguing for Valle and Vazquez, lawyer Adam Unikowski said the issue is simple: "States are sovereign, territories are not."

Some justices appeared to search for a middle ground.

Justice Stephen Breyer said an opinion saying Puerto Rico is sovereign would have "enormous implications." But he suggested the court could find that the island has some aspects of sovereignty that would apply more narrowly to double jeopardy.

"There are different kinds of territories," Breyer said.

The Obama administration has angered Puerto Rican officials by insisting that the island remains a territory subject to the control of Congress.

Justice Department lawyer Nicole Saharsky told the justices that Congress has allowed "increasing self-government" in Puerto Rico and there is no reason to think lawmakers change that. But she said Congress could revise the arrangement because the island remains a territory.

"Congress is the one who makes the rules," Saharsky said.

Ocean search for Malaysian airliner finds 2nd shipwreck

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — The undersea search for the Malaysian airliner that vanished almost two years ago has found a likely 19th century shipwreck deep in the Indian Ocean off the west Australian coast, officials said Wednesday.

A sonar search for the wreckage of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 found what appeared to be a man-made object on Dec. 19, the Australian Transport Safety Bureau said in a statement.

A follow-up investigation using an underwater drone captured high-resolution sonar images on Jan. 2 that confirmed that the find was a shipwreck, said the bureau, which is running the search for the Boeing 777 which vanished on March 8, 2014.

The Shipwreck Galleries

of the Western Australian Museum conducted a preliminary review of the images and advised that the wreck was likely to be a steel or iron ship dating from the turn of the 19th century, the bureau said.

No charges for man who killed son he mistook for intruder

CINCINNATI (AP) — No charges will be filed against a man who fatally shot his 14-year-old son after mistaking him for an intruder.

Hamilton County Prosecutor Joseph Deters said Wednesday that the man, 72, won't be charged in the Tuesday morning shooting in the basement of the Cincinnati-area home.

The man had watched his son, Georta Mack, walk to the school bus and the boy later called his father to say he was on the bus, Deters

said in his statement. The man later heard a noise in the basement and got his .45 caliber handgun before investigating, according to the prosecutor. The father told authorities that when he opened a closet door, Georta jumped out and yelled, "Boo!"

The startled man, whose name wasn't released, fired a shot that hit the boy in the neck.

"He scared me!" the distraught father said in his 911 call. "I thought he was in school. I heard noise, so I went downstairs looking and he jumped out at me. Oh, God. Get here quick!"

Police said the teen had headed to the bus stop but apparently decided he wasn't going to school and came back home through a back door.

Deters said all the forensic evidence matched the father's account of what happened and no charges were appropriate.

"There is only one word

for this — tragedy," Deters said. "It is impossible to imagine how horrible this father must feel for mistaking his son for an intruder."

Istanbul suicide bomber registered as refugee

ISTANBUL (AP) — The suicide attacker who detonated a bomb that killed 10 German tourists in the heart of Istanbul's historic district had registered as a refugee just a week earlier, Turkish officials said Wednesday, raising questions over whether extremists are posing as asylum-seekers to inflame anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe.

Turkish authorities identified the assailant in Tuesday's attack as a Syrian man who was born in 1988, and said he was affiliated somehow with the Islamic State group.



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