

Iran got devices to receive signals from US satellite

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Special to The Globe

WASHINGTON - Without the Defense Department's consent, the Commerce Department last year permitted the export to Iran of equipment capable of receiving signals from an American satellite which takes electronic pictures of the earth.

The Commerce Department says it allowed the equipment to be shipped because the technology is relatively old and the pictures it is capable of receiving are relatively indistinct.

But Pentagon and US intelligence sources claim that the Iranians could use other computers to enhance the images from the American satellite and use them to spy not only on the Iraqis but also on deployments by the United States and its allies in the Middle East.

The latest disclosures are certain to add fuel to a bitter dispute between the Defense and Commerce departments over sales of American computer equipment to Iran. Last week, The Globe reported that senior officials of the two departments had argued about a Commerce Department decision to permit the export of several Digital Equipment Corp. computers to Iran for use in civilian enterprises.

Rep. Jack Kemp (R-N.Y.) on Tuesday sent a letter to Frank Carlucci, White House national security adviser, questioning the Digital decision. Kemp also asserted that it would be "extremely shortsighted" for the administration to exclude the Defense Department from such export control decisions.

The receiving equipment sent to Iran last year is designed to pick up and decipher signals from a satellite called LANDSAT which was launched by the US government in the 1970s to provide electronic pictures of the earth for such nonmilitary uses as mapping, crop planting and locating mineral and oil deposits. Since last year, a private company called Earth Observation Satellite Company (EOSAT), owned jointly by General Electric and General Motors, has operated the satellite under contract to the US government.

The operators of LANDSAT are obliged by American law to sell pictures taken by satellite to anyone who can pay for them, including buyers from communist countries or hostile nations like Iran. However, equipment enabling countries to receive LANDSAT pictures directly from the satellite can only be exported from the United States with an export license from the Commerce Department.

The Defense Department and the CIA in the past have blocked export licenses for the shipment of such equipment to communist bloc destinations. However, the Pentagon has no power to block the shipment of such equipment to noncommunist countries like Iran unless it can prove the equipment is likely to be illegally diverted to the Soviet bloc.

According to Debbie Williams, a spokeswoman for EOSAT, the Iranian government under the shah contracted with General Electric to buy its own LANDSAT ground receiving station. But after the shah was deposed by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranians suspended payments on the equipment and General Electric decided not to ship it, she said.

In late 1985, however, the Iranians, through an international tribunal in The Hague, Holland, which was set up to settle financial claims which arose between the United States and Iran during the 1980-81 Tehran hostage crisis, expressed an interest in completing their payments on the receiving equipment and taking delivery of it, Williams said.