

Second U.S. carrier group to deploy to Gulf: sources



Reuters Photo: The aircraft carrier John C Stennis cruises through San Diego Bay towards the open ocean...

By Kristin Roberts
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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The **Pentagon** will send a second aircraft carrier and its escort ships to the Gulf, defense officials said on Wednesday, as a warning to **Syria** and **Iran** and to give commanders more flexibility in the region.

Officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Bremerton, Washington-based USS John C. Stennis strike group would deploy this month. It will put 5,000 more U.S. sailors in the region, bringing the total to 16,000.

The USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier group entered the Gulf in December.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman declined to comment, saying the Defense Department would not discuss future deployments or ship movements. But military analysts said the move was intended to demonstrate U.S. resolve in the face of acts by Iran and Syria that it sees as provocative, such as Tehran's pursuit of its nuclear program.

The Stennis had been scheduled to deploy to the Pacific region. But the Pentagon agreed instead to send the carrier group to the Gulf after a request from U.S. Central Command, the military command responsible for Middle East operations.

Senior defense officials have said that request was aimed at increasing Central Command's flexibility in a variety of operations and providing deterrence in the region.

INCREASED U.S. PRESENCE

Washington has locked horns with Tehran over the Iranian nuclear program. American defense officials also regularly charge Iran and Syria with fanning sectarian violence in **Iraq** and contributing to the deteriorating situation there by providing arms and technologies.

The second carrier, while adding relatively few service members to the region, is valuable as a symbol of America's increased presence in the Gulf, military analysts said.

Longer term, however, the Bush administration must decide if it will keep two carrier groups in the Gulf indefinitely.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates previously said the increased American presence in the Gulf was a message to the region as a whole and not a response to any specific action by Iran.

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"I think the message that we are sending to everyone, not just Iran, is that the United States is an enduring presence in this part of the world," Gates told reporters on a December visit to Baghdad. "We will be here for a long time and everybody needs to remember that -- both our friends and those who might consider themselves our adversaries."

(Additional reporting by Jim Wolf)

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