

The New York Times

Saturday, 12 July 2008

Experts point to deceptions in Iran's military display

By WILLIAM J. BROAD

Iran's war games this week featured more bluff and exaggeration than displays of menacing new power, military analysts said Friday.

The half-truths, the analysts said, included not only a doctored photo of a salvo firing but also misleading statements about the range of the largest missile and two videos that made the firings seem more numerous and fearsome than they really were.

"Deception was rampant," said Charles P. Vick, an expert on the Iranian missile program at GlobalSecurity.org, a research group in Alexandria, Va. "The bottom line is that the Iranians are tweaking our noses."

The missile firings on Wednesday and Thursday shook the oil markets, helping drive up the price of crude to a record of more than \$147 a barrel on Friday from \$136 on Wednesday. That rise, if sustained, would mean billions of added dollars for Iran, one of the world's top oil exporters.

Graham Allison, director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, estimated that the oil price increase would add up to \$25 million a day to Iran's economy and wondered if that was accidental or deliberate.

Aside from the theater of the missile firings and the prospect of windfall oil revenues, Mr. Allison said, "the question is, Does this represent any significant advance in any relevant military capability to do any damage? And I think the best judgment is, no."

The Iranians, he added, "have a history of puffing out their chests and pounding on them."

Analysts said an Iranian photograph released Wednesday that showed four missiles heading skyward had been digitally altered to make three firings look like four. The image appeared on the front pages of many newspapers and Web sites. Thursday, the Iranians released a photo showing what appeared to be the same scene, but with a grounded missile that may have failed.

Descriptions of the big weapon in the extravaganza were also misleading, the analysts said. Iran's Arabic-language Al Alam television said the Shahab-3 had a range of 2,000 kilometers or about 1,250 miles. Many news reports carried that description.

Analysts said that extended range was true of the Shahab-3b. But the missile that the Iranians actually fired Wednesday, they added, was a less advanced model known as the Shahab-3a, which has a range of about 1,500 kilometers, or roughly 900 miles.

“They do systematically try to exaggerate the range,” Geoffrey E. Forden, a missile expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said of Iranian descriptions of the Shahab. But he noted that the Shahab-3a could still “hit Israel.”

Analysts said the Shahab-3a was no longer in production.

Mr. Vick of GlobalSecurity.org cited two cases involving Iranian videos of the missile launchings that, by accident or design, had magnified the threat.

The first, he said, involved the nighttime firing of a missile that spewed a distinctive trail of fiery debris. Iranian television, he said, broadcast “two or three different views of the same thing, which gave the false impression of multiple firings.”

The second instance, Mr. Vick said, involved the firing Wednesday of the Shahab-3a and, a few seconds later, what analysts initially believed was a second Shahab. A dual launching would have been a major advance. But closer inspection showed the second missile to be a Scud-C, the range of which is far less. The Iranian video, Mr. Vick said, used a misleading perspective that made “the Scud-C look like a Shahab.” The only clue to their identities was their color, he said, the Scud green and the Shahab tan.

Overall, Mr. Vick concluded, the two days of missile firings represented no escalation over what the Iranians have done before in previous tests.

“I remain unimpressed,” he said.

Mark Mazzetti contributed reporting from Washington.