

*196

R 15546)1ZBTIYCCYN

FAM-MIDEAST-TANKS (2 TAKES)

BY BRIAN WILLIAMS

TEL RVIV; JUNE 11; REUTER -- ISRAEL SAID TODAY THAT ITS LOCALLY MADE MERKAVA (CHARIOT) TANKS KNOCKED OUT NINE SOVIET-BUILT T-72 TANKS IN THIS WEEK'S BATTLES WITH SYRIAN FORCES IN SOUTH LEBANON.

WESTERN MILITARY ATTACHES SAID IT WAS THE FIRST TIME THE T-72, WHICH IS DEPLOYED IN WESTERN EUROPE, HAD BEEN PROPERLY TESTED IN BATTLE AND THE RESULT HAD PROFOUND IMPLICATIONS FOR NATO FORCES.

"THIS IS LITTLE LESS THAN SENSATIONAL NEWS. IT SHOULD ANSWER A LOT OF QUESTIONS ABOUT SOVIET TANK CAPABILITY," ONE MILITARY ATTACHE TOLD REUTERS.

DEFENSE MINISTER ARIEL SHARON, ANNOUNCING THE SYRIAN LOSSES, GAVE NO DETAILS OF THE ENCOUNTERS, BELIEVED TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE AT THE SOUTHERN END OF LEBANON'S BEKAA VALLEY.

HE EVADED QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW MANY ISRAELI TANKS HAD BEEN LOST BUT SAID THE BATTLES HAD PROVED THAT THE MERKAVA WAS ONE OF THE BEST TANKS IN THE WORLD.

THE T-72 IS THE SOVIET UNION'S LATEST TANK. THE WESTERN MILITARY ATTACHES SAID INTELLIGENCE REPORTS ON ITS PERFORMANCE WOULD BE CLOSELY STUDIED BY NATO.

MORE 1506 JE

*197

R 15565)LZBTIYCZSA

FAM-MIDEAST-TANKS 2 TEL RVIV

"EVEN ALLOWING FOR THE FACT THAT THESE TANKS WERE CREWED BY SYRIANS AND NOT RUSSIANS, IT SUGGESTS THEY ARE NOT AS GOOD AS WE FEARED THEY WERE," ONE ATTACHE SAID.

HE ADDED, HOWEVER, "THE MERKAVA COULD HAVE BEEN BEATEN THE SYRIANS TO THE DRAG AND NO DOUBT SUPERIOR CREWS WERE A FACTOR IN THESE WEEK'S TANK BATTLES."

A RECENT ASSESSMENT BY WESTERN DEFENSE EXPERTS HAD CONCLUDED THAT THE MERKAVA, A LOW-SLUNG TANK DEVELOPED FROM THE BRITISH CHIEFTAIN, WAS INFERIOR TO THE T-72.

"IT WAS THOUGHT THAT THE T-72'S ARMOR WAS TOO HEAVY FOR THE MERKAVA'S 105MM SHELL TO PIERCE," THE ATTACHE SAID.

AN ISRAELI DEFENSE FORCE PAMPHLET ON THE MERKAVA SAYS IT IS HEAVILY PROTECTED, ALLOWING IT TO MOVE IN CLOSE TO TARGETS.

SERIA STARTED TAKING DELIVERY OF T-72s ABOUT 10 MONTHS AGO. ACCORDING TO THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES, IT NOW HAS ABOUT 400 OF THEM.

REUTER 1509 JE