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LEBANON/CIVIL  
CONFLICT

RATHER: Good evening. This is the CBS Evening News, Dan Rather reporting. There were unconfirmed reports last night that American warships off Lebanon's coast were on high alert against threatened terrorist suicide attacks. Today those stories were confirmed, and Pentagon correspondent David Martin has learned the threats appear to come from Iran.

MARTIN: A White House official says terrorist groups in Lebanon have acquired small aircraft in preparation for kamikaze attacks against the U.S. Marines or American ships off shore. Other government officials tell CBS News that unmarked crates have been spotted moving from Iran through Syria to the Iranian stronghold of Baalbek. The crates are said to contain small propeller-driven aircraft, probably American-made like these F-33s. Officials say such aircraft, camouflaged with American markings, pose a particularly worrisome threat because U.S. gunners might hesitate before shooting at them. Members of Iran's fanatical revolutionary guards are training to fly the F-33s. But so far there is no evidence the pilots have arrived in Lebanon. Pentagon officials say the U.S. would probably launch a preemptive air strike to destroy the planes if intelligence confirms they are assembled and ready to fly. The American fleet has been on guard against kamikaze attacks ever since the October bombing of the Marines. In November, after a CBS News plane flew out to take pictures of the ships, concerns about a small aircraft slipping through the fleet's elaborate defenses increased. The U.S. issued a warning that any planes coming within five miles of an American ship will place themselves at risk. Now the fleet has gone to an even higher state of alert. However, some U.S. analysis regard the kamikaze threat as a smokescreen, intended to hide a shift in terrorist tactics away from suicide bombings toward assassinations of prominent Americans such as Wednesday's killing of Malcolm Kerr, head of the American University in Beirut. David Martin, CBS News, the Pentagon.