

Missile Watch #4: Global Update (January – March 2009)

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Afghanistan

In March, the *Sunday Times* of London reported on the Taliban's alleged acquisition of Iranian-supplied SA-14 missiles, which the Afghan insurgent group reportedly wants for a "spectacular" attack on coalition forces. The accusation reportedly came from unidentified "American intelligence sources." According to the *Sunday Times*, "...coalition forces only became aware of the presence of SA14s two weeks ago when parts from two of them were discovered during an American operation in western Afghanistan." The article provides no information on the number of SA-14s allegedly circulating in Afghanistan, their condition, or Iran's alleged connection to them. When queried about the *Sunday Times* article, a US military official told the Federation of American Scientists that "[man-portable air defense systems] have been recovered in Afghanistan since 2007," but refused to provide additional details because of "operational security concerns."

Other types of MANPADS reportedly acquired by the Taliban and other unauthorized end-users in Afghanistan include the Chinese HN-5, photographs of which were obtained by the *Washington Times* in 2007, and the ubiquitous SA-7.

Iraq

Press releases and correspondence with US military officials reveal that US and Iraqi troops seized at least five SA-7 missiles in raids on insurgent arms caches since January. Two of the missiles (along with three batteries) were seized on January 10th from a cache located south of Baghdad. The other three were discovered in a cache west of Baghdad on February 5th. The recovered missiles raise the total number of illicit missiles seized in Iraq since October 2006 to at least 126. The vast majority are first- and second-generation Soviet-designed infrared seekers, namely SA-7s and SA-14s, although the US military has also reportedly recovered at least one Iranian Misagh-1 missile in Iraq since 2004. See [Missile Watch #3](#) for more information.

MANPADS in Iraq: Recovered Missiles by Type October 2006 through March 2009	
Item	Quantity
SA-7 missile (with or without launcher)	At least 40
SA-7 launcher (alone)	3
SA-14 missile (with or without launcher)	3
Misagh-1 missile	At least 1
Russian surface-to-air missile, unidentified	50
Surface-to-air missile, unidentified	At least 32
Surface-to-air missile launcher, unidentified	1
<i>Compiled by the Federation of American Scientists</i>	

Sri Lanka

On March 25th, members of the embattled Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fired two surface-to-air missiles at Sri Lankan military helicopters, according to air force officials interviewed by Reuters. Both missiles missed their targets. The LTTE is known to possess MANPADS, which are occasionally recovered by Sri Lankan authorities. In February, information provided by an LTTE suspect led to the discovery of an SA-14 “hidden in the hollow of a tree” in the Thoppigala area. A photo of the missile, which police believe was abandoned by LTTE forces retreating from the area, was published in the *Daily Mirror*.

The Reuters article also briefly mentions an assertion reportedly made by a former LTTE commander that the rebel group lost “a large cache of shoulder-fired rockets” during tsunami that struck Sri Lanka in 2004. The article does not indicate whether the “rockets” – a term that is often used to refer to rocket-propelled grenades – were indeed MANPADS.

Somalia (Somaliland)

In January, authorities from the self-declared republic of Somaliland announced that they had seized ten “missile launchers” from a house near the city of Hargeisa. According to Somaliland’s interior minister, who was quoted by *Xinhua News Service*, the “shoulder-held, one-time use missile launchers” came from Eritrea through Somalia. *Somaliland Times* later reported that the weapons were part of a consignment of 18 “units,” and that eight of the units were still at large in Somalia. Citing unnamed “reliable sources,” *Somaliland Times* also claimed that the missiles were “intended for use against Western military and civilian aircrafts which use Djibouti airport...” The articles do not identify the make and model of the weapons, or whether they were full systems (i.e. missiles and launchers), or just launchers (as the statement by the interior minister seems to indicate).

Dozens, possibly hundreds, of MANPADS have been transferred to various Somali factions in recent years. According to UN and media accounts, Eritrea is the source of many of these missiles, including an advanced SA-18 Iglá that UN officials were able to trace back to a consignment of Russian missiles shipped to Eritrea in 1995. An SA-18 – also allegedly supplied by Eritrea – was used in a fatal March 2007 attack on a Belarussian cargo aircraft departing from Mogadishu’s airport.

Sources:

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