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LETTER DATED 6 JULY 1988 FROM THE ACTING PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

In accordance with Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, I wish on behalf of my Government to report that United States forces have exercised their inherent right of self-defence under international law by taking defensive action in response to an attack by the Islamic Republic of Iran against United States forces lawfully operating in international waters of the Persian Gulf.

On 3 July 1988, the USS Vincennes, which was operating in international waters in the Persian Gulf, sent a helicopter on an investigative patrol in international airspace in response to indications that approximately a dozen Iranian small boats were congregating to attack neutral merchant shipping. At approximately 2.10 a.m. (Eastern Daylight Time) on 3 July 1988, a group of Iranian patrol craft fired on the United States helicopter. The helicopter, without returning fire, returned immediately to the Vincennes, which was 10 nautical miles from the scene at the time of the incident. At approximately 2.42 a.m. (Eastern Daylight Time), as the Vincennes and another United States naval vessel were approaching the group of Iranian small boats, at least four of the small boats turned towards and began closing in on the United States warships. At that time, both United States ships opened fire on the small boats, sinking two and damaging a third. In the course of the United States response to the Iranian attack, the Vincennes fired in self-defence at what it believed to be a hostile Iranian military aircraft, after sending repeated warnings (to which the aircraft did not respond). Regrettably, the Iranian civilian airliner was shot down by the Vincennes. As President Reagan said, "this is a terrible human tragedy". The United States deeply regrets the tragic loss of life that occurred and is conducting a full investigation. The United States will also co-operate in all appropriate respects with any International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) investigation into this incident.

It remains the policy of my Government not to seek a military confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran or a widening of the conflict in the area.

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The actions of the United States forces in response to being attacked by Iranian small boats were taken in accordance with our inherent right of self-defence, as recognized in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations. The tragic loss of lives resulting from these actions underscores the dangers posed by the continuation of the Gulf war, the root-cause of tension and violence in the area, and the urgency of bringing this senseless conflict to an early end. The United States once again calls upon the international community, and particularly the members of the Security Council, to join us in redoubling our efforts to end the war as soon as possible and restore peace and security to the region, through the full and rapid implementation of Security Council resolution 598 (1987).

I ask that you circulate the text of this letter as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Herbert S. OKUN
Ambassador
Acting Permanent Representative

