

## U.S. ships positioning off Lebanon coast

*by UPI*

BEIRUT, Lebanon - The U.S. Navy has positioned the USS Cole and other ships in the Mediterranean Sea off Lebanon, Pentagon officials said. The deployment Thursday comes amid a political standoff over Lebanon's presidency between parliament's pro-Western majority and pro-Syrian opposition, CNN reported. "It's a group of ships that will operate in the vicinity for a while and as the ships in our Navy do, the presence is important," said Adm. Mike Mullen, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman. The decision also was seen as a response to stepped-up fighting in the Gaza area that threatens to spill into other fronts, reported DEBKAfile.com, a military intelligence Web site. The Cole -- a guided-missile destroyer -- and two support ships are close to Lebanon but beyond visual range, officials said. Another six ships are en route. A White House official told CNN sending ships to the region was a message to Syria that "the U.S. is concerned about the situation in Lebanon, and we want to see the situation resolved." Mullen did not say whether the deployment was in response to a pending Lebanese parliamentary vote on a new president. Lebanon has been without a president since November, when pro-Syrian Emile Lahoud's term expired.

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