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U.S. Military Flies Large Cargo Of Nuclear Gear Out Of Libya

By Carla Anne Robbins, Staff Reporter Of The Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON -- In an important step toward Libya's disarmament, a U.S. military transport plane flew a large cargo of nuclear-related equipment and material out of Libya.

According to U.S. officials, the 55,000 pounds of cargo included centrifuge parts, used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons, as well as two tons of uranium hexafluoride, a gas that is a raw material for uranium enrichment. The plane also carried some guidance parts for Libya's longer-range missiles.

The Bush administration is weighing how to begin rewarding Tripoli for its good behavior. Several officials suggested that Washington could start in the next few weeks by lifting a ban on travel to Libya by American citizens.

The C-17 transport landed Tuesday morning in Tennessee, where its cargo will be examined and disposed of by experts at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

A U.S. official said that the cargo was about 20% of the nuclear equipment the U.S. and Britain are planning to move out of Libya in coming weeks, either by air or ship. "But this was some of the most sensitive stuff," the official said. Last week, the U.S. flew out what another official described as a "briefcase's" worth of design plans for a nuclear warhead.

U.S. officials have been surprised by the sophistication of the nuclear equipment Libya managed to buy secretly on the international black market. And they are eager to identify all of Tripoli's suppliers in an effort to close them down. U.S. officials believe that Pakistani nuclear scientists were a main source for Libya -- but not the only source. The Libyans also managed to acquire equipment to assemble and eventually manufacture centrifuges from European suppliers, among others.

"While these shipments are only the beginning of the elimination of Libya's weapons, the shipments, as well as the close cooperation on the ground in Libya, reflect real progress in Libya meeting its commitments," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan. According to another official, when a team of American and British experts arrived there last week, the Libyans had already crated equipment for transport to the U.S.

The news appears to be a welcome relief for the White House, which has faced renewed, tough questioning in recent days over the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

After nine months of secret negotiations with the U.S. and Britain, Libya announced in mid-December it was giving up its illicit nuclear and chemical weapons programs, as well as its longer-range missiles.

Officials in Tripoli say the move reflects Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's desire to end his country's isolation and salvage an economy battered by years of international sanctions and extreme mismanagement. The Libyans are especially eager to normalize relations with the U.S. and see a return of American oil companies.

The image of rewarding Col. Gadhafi, the suspected author of the Pan Am 103 bombing, is a politically sensitive one. And the White House maintains that relations won't be normalized until Libya's disarmament is complete. But U.S. officials are considering other partial steps as the process unfolds, including some loosening of the ban on U.S. oil investments.

While U.S. and British weapons experts are concentrating first on Libya's nuclear program, they are discussing with Tripoli how to dismantle its chemical and missile stocks. Libya has large quantities of mustard gas and chemical munitions, as well as longer-range missiles, to be destroyed. U.S. officials said that in the last few weeks the Libyans have already begun crushing a small number of chemical shells. Most of that work is expected to take place on the ground.