

Japanese fleet in Indian Ocean to back US strikes

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ASIA NEWS NETWORK

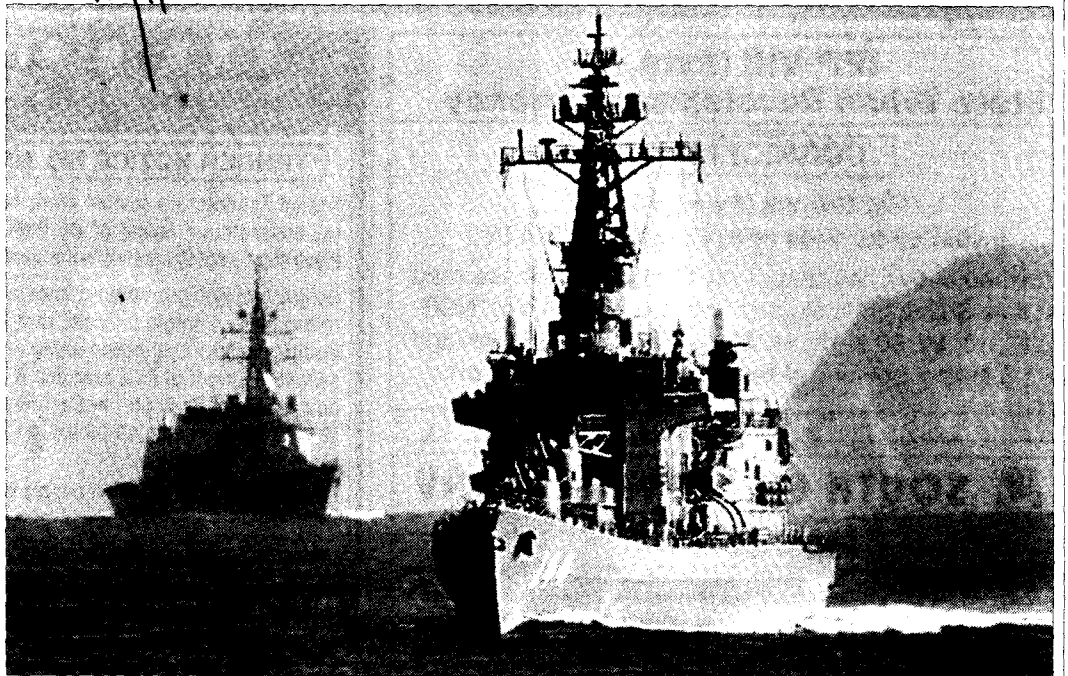
TOKYO, Nov. 9. — The Maritime Self-Defence Force vessels sent to the Indian Ocean today will first take part in a probe and research mission, which is allowed under the defence agency establishment law.

But after completing the task, the objective will be providing supplies and logistic help to the US-led war against terrorism under the newly framed anti-terrorism law.

About 40 people, protesting against the dispatch of the flotilla, shouted: "Don't let the Koizumi administration go to war" and "We won't allow dispatch of SDF vessels". Right-wingers, however, greeted the sailors by playing military songs.

Japan is likely to send a second flotilla of MSDF vessels, as early as late November, to provide rear-echelon support to US and British forces. Both the flotillas will be involved in "transport" activities based on the anti-terrorism law.

The Opposition is, however, concerned over the mission's dual nature. Yesterday, the administrative vice-defence minister, Mr Ken Sato, said the flotilla was sent not under the anti-terrorism law, but the conventional law. "The basic idea is to gather intelligence so that



Japanese destroyers, *Kurama* (front) and *Kirisame*, after their departure from Sasebo port on Friday. — AP/PTI

we can smoothly draw up basic plans to support the US-led operation."

On the dual-purpose mission, a defence agency official had said: "The ships will leave prepared to carry out the logistics missions. There'll be no problems in conducting the operation."

On switching missions, he said it would be more effective if the MSDF personnel conduct-

ing the intelligence-gathering mission carried out the logistics mission as well.

On 17 September, the government came up with a policy of promoting "the prompt dispatch of MSDF ships for intelligence gathering." Initially, the government had planned to send the ships the same month.

However, some members of both ruling and Opposition parties expressed concern over

sending an Aegis-equipped destroyer, which is equipped with a state-of-the-art air defence system and powerful intelligence-gathering equipment.

They argued the action could lead Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defence.

The dispatch of an Aegis vessel was thus shelved as deliberations over the anti-terrorism Bill became a major focus of discussion at the Diet.