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CUBA

# N. Korean ships visited Cuba 5 times since 2009

› Shipping monitors said the visits reflect increased contacts between the two nations.

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North Korean freighters made at least five visits to Cuba in the past four years, although other Pyongyang ships may well have sailed to the island under different flags or ownership documents, shipping monitors said Wednesday. At least one North Korean-owned vessel, the Woory Star 2, is registered in Panama, the monitors added. Another was sailing under a Belize flag when it foiled a U.S. Navy attempt to search it in 2011.

The Cuba ports of call point to rising trade between the communist allies, highlighted last week when Panamanian authorities searching the freighter Chong Chon Gang found tons of Cuban weapons hidden under 220,000 sacks of sugar.

“The trade numbers are fuzzy but clearly there’s been more contact between the two countries in recent years,” said Michael Madden, editor of the North Korea Leadership Watch, which monitors the nation’s politics.

Cuba has said it was sending the “obsolete” weaponry, including MiG jets and anti-aircraft missiles, to Pyongyang to be refurbished and returned. It has said nothing about the U.N. arms embargo in effect against North Korea since 2006.

The Chong Chon Gang was one of at least five North Korean ships that docked in Cuba since 2009, according to the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, which monitors international shipping reports. The freighter was in Cuba some time between June 1, when it crossed the Panama Canal from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and July 10, when it approached Panama to re-cross the canal on its way home. Its transponder was off throughout its Caribbean stay, so its ports of call in Cuba are unknown.

The Po Thong Gang docked at Cuba’s sugar-exporting port of Puerto Padre in April 2012, said Matthew Godsey, of the Wisconsin Project, and had also docked in Havana and Santiago de Cuba during one visit in 2011.

The Oun Chong Nyon Ho docked in Havana and Puerto Padre in May 2012, and the Mu Du Bong visited Havana in May 2009, Godsey added. Neither of those nor the Po Thong Gang were searched as they left the Caribbean.

Two other North Korea freighters, the Ryong Gun Bong and Ap Rok Gang also made recent crossings of the Panama Canal but were not known to have docked in Cuba, according to the Wisconsin Project. The Chong Chon Gang also transited the canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific in 2008 and docked at the Brazilian port of Santos in 2009 before heading to Ukraine and Turkey.

All five ships “operate in a classic shell company network” and are or have been run by Ocean Maritime Management, a state shipping company based in Pyongyang, according to the Wisconsin Project’s website.

But Godsey stressed that those five visits to Cuba do not include visits by ships flagged or owned outside the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea — the official name of North Korea. They also don’t include ships sailing with their automatic location beacons not working, like the Chong Chon Gang during its latest trip to Cuba.