

Iranian Navy begins maneuvers in Persian Gulf - national TV

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TEHRAN, March 22 (RIA Novosti) – The Iranian Navy has begun a series of military exercises in the Persian Gulf to test the capabilities of its domestically built naval weaponry, national television reported Thursday.

According to various intelligence reports, Iran has been spending a considerable share of its defense budget on its naval forces over the last decade. During an exercise last November, it test-launched three new models of domestically manufactured anti-ship missiles with extended strike range.

“The Navy will demonstrate its defense capability and test Iranian-produced weaponry during the [current] exercises,” said Admiral Sajjad Kuchaki, commander of the Iranian Navy.

The exercises, which will last until March 30, will highlight simultaneous close-in and stand-off attacks, involving destroyers, missile boats, submarines, and combat aircraft, he said.

The current wargames are the fourth since the beginning of 2007 and are largely considered to be part of preparations for possible U.S. and Israeli strikes on its nuclear facilities.

The international press has in recent months actively discussed the possibility of such strikes, but almost all key figures in the Bush administration have repeatedly refuted the existence of any plans to do so.

However, U.S. Vice President Richard Cheney has not ruled out a military strike, saying all options were on the table.

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