***FINANCIAL TIMES (London)***

***July 12, 2012 6:04 pm***

**Ship owner not aware of Syrian helicopters**

**By Charles Clover in Moscow**

The owner of the [Alaed](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6ac41730-ba14-11e1-937b-00144feabdc0.html), the Russian ship forced to return to Russia last month after it was found to be carrying assault helicopters bound for Syria, has said it was not aware of the nature of the cargo on board the vessel.

Femco, the Russian shipping company, said it had rented out the Alaed to a charter company, which it would not name.

The admission by Femco injects further mystery into the case of the Alaed, including the possibility that whichever entity was shipping the helicopters to Syria was trying to do so as covertly as possible.

Femco said the ship’s bill of lading, which contains a description of the cargo and which it says it forwarded to its London insurer before the voyage, “said nothing about military equipment or Syria”.

“If you own a car and rent it to someone and they use it as a taxi, and the taxi takes a thief to your home and the thief robs you, are you responsible?” Femco said in an email response to questions from the FT, which it said it would post on its website on Friday.

The ship had been carrying three Syrian assault helicopters, which had been recently repaired by a Russian enterprise in Kaliningrad, when London insurer Standard P&I Club revoked its maritime insurance on June 18, reportedly under pressure from the British government, citing EU sanctions against Syria which prevent EU entities from trading with Damascus.

Femco disputed such sanctions would apply to the Alaed, which is Russian owned and flew a Curacao flag, saying the UK insurer’s decision was “unexplainable”. Standard P&I Club declined to comment.

Without insurance the ship would not have been able to complete its voyage as most ports require it.

The company, which is based in Yuzhno Sakhalinsk in Russia’s far east, has repeatedly declined to comment on the nature of cargo, even after Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed on June 21 “Yes, [the ship] was carrying three helicopters”, and had earlier confirmed they were bound for Syria.

The Alaed returned to Murmansk on June 24 and was reflagged as a Russian ship, according to press reports. The helicopters, according to Russian officials cited in the media, have so far not been returned to Syria.

***July 13, 2012 5:51 pm***

**Confusion clouds fate of Syria helicopters**

**By Charles Clover in Mosocw**

The fate of [three Russian-made Syrian assault helicopters](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ceeb4620-b4b5-11e1-bb2e-00144feabdc0.html), which Russia tried to ship to Damascus last month, remained unclear on Friday amid contradictory statements by the Russian government and a private ship owner.

Attention has once again focused on the cargo ship the Alaed, which in June attempted to carry the three Mi-25 helicopters from Russia’s Baltic Sea port of Kaliningrad to Syria, but turned back after a UK based company withdrew its insurance under pressure from the British government for violating EU sanctions on Syria.

The ship set off once again from the Arctic port of Murmansk on July 10, and was spotted off the coast of Norway on Thursday, amid contradictory statements about what was on board.

Andrei Popov, head of fleet operations for Russian shipping company Femco, owner and operator of the Alaed, in email correspondence with the FT on Friday for a second day denied that the Mi-25 helicopters, which had been undergoing repairs in Kaliningrad, were again on board the ship, nor that it was on its way to Syria.

“At the moment the Alaed is not headed to Syria, and we do not have such plans” said Mr Popov, saying its destination was St Petersburg and then Vladivostok.

However, Rosoboronexport, the state arms export monopoly, contradicted the Femco account saying the helicopters were on the board the Alaed, adding that they were heading for a Russian port.

The mystery surrounding the voyage was further muddied by the simultaneous voyage this week of around a dozen Russian warships of the Baltic and Northern fleets whose destination government representatives were unable to coherently state.

The ships include 4 destroyers, a frigate, and four large attack landing ships, capable of carrying more than 1,000 soldiers, 47 vehicles, and 2,000 tonnes of military cargo, according to information from Maritime Bulletin, a shipping newsletter.

Russia’s Federal Agency for Military and Technical Cooperation said on July 11 that the ships were heading to Syria to defend that country from a possible blockade by western warships. The same day, however, Russia’s Foreign Ministry denied “rumours” that the ships were headed to Syria insisting they were en route to manoeuvres in the North Atlantic.

Russia’s Navy, meanwhile, had a different version: on Friday it said the ships from the Baltic and Northern fleets were headed only to the North Atlantic, but a separate flotilla from the Black Sea fleet of 4 ships, including two large assault landing ships, were headed through the Bosphorus en route to the Mediterranean to fulfil “long planned duties.”

One plausible version of the Mediterranean voyage is to provide military cover for civilian ships, possibly the Alaed, to ship military cargo to the Syrian port of Tartus.

Femco, however, is still insisting that the Alaed was not en route to Syria, despite exchanging its Curacao flag for a Russian registration, thought to be needed to defend the ship against arbitrary boarding and seizure by hostile navies. However, Mr Popov said the Alaed would continue on to Vladivostok by way of the north east corridor through the Arctic. If true, this would mean that Syria was not an intermediate destination of the ship. Russian flags are required for ships making this Arctic voyage, Mr Popov said.

The confusing and contradictory announcements about the Alaed and the Russian fleet illustrate either a well thought out disinformation strategy, or total confusion and chaos about the objectives of Russia’s Syria strategy.

It is likely the latter, according to Mikhail Voytenko, author of Maritime Bulletin and an expert on the Russian Navy and shipping industry: “recent moves of Russian authorities can’t be explained by any other sensible reasons except drugs and alcohol influence” he said.