

U.S. alleges Iranian plot to murder Saudi ambassador, imposes new sanctions

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By Xinhua writers Du Jing, Ran Wei, Wang Yongkang

WASHINGTON, Oct. 11 (Xinhua) -- The U.S. government said on Tuesday that it has foiled a plot allegedly involving Iran to assassinate Saudi Arabian ambassador to Washington, and that it is imposing new sanctions against four people linked with the alleged plot.

The Justice Department said that Manssor Arbabsiar, a 56-year-old naturalized U.S. citizen holding both Iranian and U.S. passports, and Iranian Gholam Shakuri have been charged with conspiracy to murder a foreign official, and conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction, among others.

The alleged plot was directed by "elements of the Iranian government," the Justice Department said in a statement. Shakuri is described in the criminal complaint as member of the Quds Force, a branch of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Arbabsiar was arrested on Sept. 29, 2011, at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport. He faces a maximum potential sentence of life in prison if convicted. Shakuri remains at large.

According to the criminal complaint filed in the Southern District of New York, Arbabsiar and his Iran-based co-conspirators have been plotting the murder of the Saudi Ambassador since spring this year. He allegedly met on a number of occasions in Mexico with an informant of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) who has posed as an associate of an international drug trafficking cartel.

Arbabsiar arranged to hire the DEA informant to murder the Ambassador Adel Al-Jubeir, and Shakuri and other co-conspirators were aware of and approved the plan, the complaint said.

NEW SANCTIONS IMPOSED

The U.S. government has vowed to hold Iran accountable for the alleged plot.

"The complaint alleges that this conspiracy was conceived, was sponsored, and was directed from Iran and constitutes a flagrant violation against the law from protecting diplomats from being harmed," U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder said at a press conference.

"In addition to them being held accountable for their plot, the United States is committed to holding Iran accountable for its actions," he said.

The U.S. Treasury Department immediately announced that it is imposing economic penalties against four people linked to the alleged plot, including the two men who have been charged.

The financial transactions at the heart of the alleged plot "lay bare the risk that banks and other institutions face in doing business with Iran," Treasury Undersecretary David Cohen said.

The U.S. government has long maintained sanctions against Iran for its alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons and state sponsorship of terrorism, banning commercial and financial transactions with Iran by U.S. firms. Iran has denied the accusations and insisted on the peaceful purpose of its nuclear program.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the U.S. government will consult with its allies on ways to "further isolate" Iran.

"We will be consulting with our friends and partners around the world about how we can send a very strong message that this kind of action, which violates international norms, must be ended," Clinton told reporters.

Ted Carpenter, a senior fellow at Washington-based think-tank Cato Institute, however, said that given the already miserable state of U.S.-Iranian relations, the allegation will have only limited additional bilateral impact -- unless the Obama administration seeks to make the episode a high-priority matter.

"It seems unlikely, though, that the administration will want to escalate matters from an incident to a crisis with Iran," he told Xinhua.

Carpenter said that he expects Iranian-Arab (and especially Iranian-Saudi) tensions to rise sharply in the coming months.

IRAN REJECTS ALLEGATIONS

Iran has described the U.S. accusations as "a prefabricated scenario which is totally unfounded" and aimed at sowing discord in the region.

Ramin Mehman-Parast, the spokesman of the Iranian Foreign Ministry was quoted by the semi-official Fars news agency as saying that the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran are based on bilateral respects and that such unfounded allegations would leave no impact on the world public opinion.

Earlier Tuesday, Iran's official news agency IRNA described the U.S. allegation as a new U.S. propaganda against Iran. "The U.S. Government is launching a new propaganda campaign against the Islamic Republic of Iran," the report said, citing an unnamed source.

Ali Akbar Javanfekr, the press aide to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was also quoted by media as saying that the alleged plot is a fabrication to turn public attention away from domestic problems within the United State.

SAUDI REACTIONS

The Saudi embassy in Washington has thanked the U.S. for preventing the alleged assassination attempt on the Saudi ambassador, the embassy said on Tuesday.

"Embassy would like to express its appreciation to the responsible agencies of the U.S. government for preventing a criminal act from taking place," said the Saudi embassy in its Tweeter feed.

"Plot to assassinate ambassador is a despicable violation of international norms, standards, conventions, not in accord with principles of humanity," said the embassy. (Xinhua editor in New York Hu Lvjie also contributed to the story)