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German magazine said UN commission suspects Shiite group Hezbollah denies reported role in Hariri murder



Hezbollah says the report aims at influencing the June 7 election (File)

DUBAI/BERLIN (AlArabiya.net, AFP)

Lebanon's Hezbollah on Sunday dismissed a German magazine report that a U.N. commission believed the Shiite group was behind the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri even as Israel called for its leader Hassan Narrallah's arrest.

"This is a pure fabrication aimed at influencing the election campaign and to deflect attention from the news about the dismantling of spy networks working for Israel," a Hezbollah statement said in response to Germany's Der Spiegel's article.

But in an email response to Al Arabiya, Eric Fullath, who wrote the controversial article implicating Hezbolla, said Der Spiegel gave the Special Tribunal for Lebanon 24 hours to respond to queries about the names of people mentioned in the U.N. investigative commission's new evidence, but no response was given. Fullath also stated he was not surprised by the U.N. commission's vague response to the information he revealed.

Der Spiegel reported on Saturday that the U.N. commission probing the Hariri murder had new evidence that Hezbollah special forces "planned and executed" the Beirut car bombing that killed the former billionaire prime minister and 22 others.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman on Sunday called for an international arrest warrant against Nasrallah because the report alleged he was directly involved in the assassination.

"He should have an international arrest warrant issued against him, and if not, he should be arrested by force," he said.

The article did not specify how it had obtained the information and relied solely on anonymous sources.

But it said the head of the investigative commission, Canadian prosecutor Daniel Bellemare, and others at the tribunal "want to hold back this information, of which they have been aware for about a month."

A spokeswoman for the prosecutor refused to comment on the report.

"We don't know where they are getting the story from. The office of the prosecutor doesn't comment on any issues related to operational aspects of the investigation," she said.

Sayyed Moussa, a Hezbollah spokesman, dismissed the Der Spiegel article Sunday in an interview with Lebanon's NBN network saying that the magazine had been attacking Syria for the past four years and that the war tribunal had no idea from where the information had been obtained.

The unsourced article comes just two weeks ahead of the June 7 parliamentary elections pitting the U.S.-backed parliamentary majority against an alliance headed by Hezbollah which has the support of Syria and Iran.

In Lebanon Friday, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, the highest-level U.S. official to visit Lebanon in more than 25 years, reinforced U.S. support for Lebanon's pro-Western government.

Mobile phone network

According to Der Spiegel, the Iran-backed Shiite group is implicated through the discovery of two linked networks of mobile phones, all belonging to Hezbollah's "operational arm."

It said a secret unit of Lebanese security forces, headed by intelligence expert Captain Wissam Eid, filtered out the numbers of eight mobile phones that could be pinpointed to the area around Hariri leading up to and on the day of his murder.

The unit then uncovered a second network of about 20 mobiles that repeatedly had close contact with the first network.

Eid was himself killed in a terrorist attack in the Beirut suburb of Hasmiyah on Jan. 25, 2008. The Der Spiegel report said Hezbollah's commando unit is thought to be behind that assassination as well but gave no proof.

The magazine added that investigators struck lucky when a suspected Hezbollah member, who had completed training in Iran, used one of the "hot" phones to call his girlfriend, leading to his identification.

The slip up allegedly led investigators to a man named Hajj Salim, who they believe to be the commander of the "military" wing of Hezbollah and who is the one that masterminded the attack.

According to the magazine, Salim's secret "Special Operational Unit" reports directly to Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah.

Missing evidence

The revelations could offer a dramatic twist to an investigation that has already pointed the finger at Syria but in recent months had appeared to have gone cold.

Last month, the U.N. special tribunal handling the case ordered the release, due to a lack of evidence, of four Lebanese generals who had been held for nearly four years without charge over the assassination.

In 2005, an investigation team approved by the U.N. and headed by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis found that Syrian security forces and high-ranking Lebanese officials were in responsible for the killing of Hariri murder. But the final and definitive piece of evidence was never found.

But Syria has consistently denied any involvement in Hariri's assassination and the killing of other anti-Syrian politicians and figures since then.