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## Fingers of 5 hostages delivered to US officials

(Agencies)

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BAGHDAD -- US authorities in Baghdad have received five severed fingers belonging to four Americans and an Austrian who were taken hostage more than a year ago in Iraq , US officials said Wednesday.

The FBI is investigating the grisly development, and the families of the five kidnapped contractors have been notified, American officials said on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the case publicly.



MSG. Peter Black from Smiths Station, AL, of 3rd Brigade Combat team, 3rd Infantry Division listens to an Iraqi woman during a patrol at Al-leg area about 60 kilometers (40 miles) south of Baghdad, Iraq, on Tuesday, March 11, 2008. [Agencies]

Authorities confirmed that the fingers belonged to hostages Jonathan Cote, of Gainesville, Fla.; Joshua Munns, of Redding, Calif.; Paul Johnson Reuben, of Buffalo, Minn.; Bert Nussbaumer of Vienna, Austria ; and Ronald J. Withrow, an American who was kidnapped separately from the others.

No information was available on when or how the fingers were delivered to US authorities. Some relatives of the missing men said that they'd heard weeks ago that the DNA of the hostages had been obtained, but they'd been given no details.

The first four men were security contractors with Kuwait-based Crescent Security and were captured in a brazen ambush of their 43-truck supply convoy in the southern Iraqi town of Safwan, near the Kuwaiti border, on Nov. 16, 2006.

There was no word on a fifth contractor who was seized with them, John Young , of Kansas City. Contrary to Austrian news reports, none of the fingers belonged to him, authorities said.

"The government is in touch with us, but they said nothing has been verified yet," said Sharon

DeBrabander, Young's mother. "I certainly don't understand why my son's wasn't found. What does that mean?"

Withrow, a computer specialist who worked for JPI Worldwide, was kidnapped separately at a phony checkpoint near the southern Iraqi city of Basra on Jan. 5, 2007, according to news reports. Very little information is publicly available about his abduction; the bodies of his Iraqi translator and driver were discovered the next day. His employer is a Las Vegas-based company that provides Internet and technological support to remote or war-torn areas around the globe, according to the company's Web site.

The Austrian weekly magazine News first reported the delivery of the five fingers in Wednesday's edition, citing unnamed authorities working on the case.

Austrian officials said at a news conference in Vienna that US officials had provided information about "fingerprints and DNA traces that were positively matched to Nussbaumer," the Austrian hostage. They didn't confirm that the sample was a severed finger.

Relatives of the American hostages said they received phone calls from US authorities early Wednesday, though initially they were told only that fingerprints or DNA had been obtained. Later, at least one father said he'd been notified that his son's finger had been delivered by the hostage-takers, but there still was confusion among the relatives about the development.

"All we have right now is prayers," said Mark Munns, the father of former Marine Joshua Munns, 25, who has spent his past two birthdays in captivity. "I don't know how to make head or tails of what's going on. Are they still alive? A whole bunch of stuff goes through your head."

State Department representatives check in with the families in a telephone conference call every Monday, though several relatives have complained that they're being kept in the dark about the investigation. The FBI has told them that the information is classified to preserve the integrity of the investigation- little solace for families who've gone 18 months with scant news.

"I know we're in a war on terror, but to not tell the families anything and let us sit out here for 18 months just isn't right," Mark Munns said.

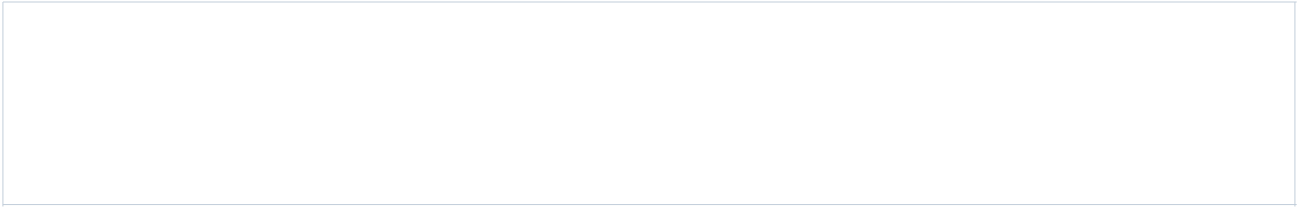
The Crescent contractors appeared in two hostage videos released in December 2006 and January 2007 in which they pleaded for the United States to withdraw troops from Iraq and to free all Iraqi prisoners. In the videos, they appeared in good condition and said that they were being treated well.

No financial demand has been made public, and it's unclear what group is holding the men. All of the hostages were seized in southern Iraq, where powerful Shiite Muslim militias operate with relative freedom.

"I'm hoping this may be a sign that the hostage-takers sent the fingers to prove they have the guys and may want to deal. I'm trying to look at the positive of this," said Mark Koscielski, a Minnesotan who is in close contact with the families of the hostages and maintains a Web site, [www.Save5.net](http://www.Save5.net), dedicated to the abducted men. One of the hostages, Reuben, is a former Minneapolis police officer.

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