

Severed fingers of contractors sent to U.S. in Iraq

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U.S. authorities are in possession of five severed fingers, four of which belong to private security contractors who were abducted in Iraq nearly 16 months ago and remain missing, according to law enforcement sources close to the investigation.

The fingers were delivered last month to U.S. authorities in Iraq but were not accompanied by a ransom demand or other information, according to sources. Fingerprint and DNA analysis determined that they were removed from four of five guards taken hostage during an ambush near the Kuwaiti border on Nov. 16, 2006.

The missing guards, four Americans and an Austrian, worked for Kuwait-based Crescent Security Group. The fifth severed finger was taken from an American contractor seized separately but reportedly held with the other missing men, the sources said.

U.S. authorities have been unable to determine whether the fingers were removed from corpses or while the men were alive, according to the sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the investigation is ongoing. The fingers were partially decomposed at the time they were obtained.

"There's no way to accurately depict at this point whether it was prior to or after; scientifically I don't think they've been able to determine that," said a source familiar with the investigation. "It's possible they were removed while they were still alive and possible they were removed after they were dead."

The four Crescent contractors whose fingers have been identified are: Jonathon Cote, 25, of Getzville, N.Y.; Paul Reuben, 41, of Buffalo, Minn.; Joshua Munns, 24, of Redding, Calif.; and Burt Nussbaumer, 26, of Vienna, Austria. The fifth finger belonged to Ronald J. Withrow, 40, of Lubbock, Texas, a contractor for JPI Worldwide.

John Young, 45, of Lee's Summit, Mo., is also missing but none of his fingers was among those forwarded to U.S. authorities. Young was the Crescent Security team leader the day of the attack.

The grisly disclosure first appeared in *News*, an Austrian newsweekly. The FBI, which is leading the investigation into the missing men, was informing some of their relatives as late as Wednesday that it had no information that the reports were true.

The families were informed by the FBI last month that DNA and fingerprint evidence of the hostages had been discovered, according to relatives, but no additional information was provided.

Jackie Stewart, the mother of Josh Munns, a former U.S. Marine, said she spoke with a local FBI agent Wednesday morning after the reports of severed fingers began to circulate among the families.

"She told me, 'We have no confirmed reports that any of this is true,' " Stewart said. "She said, 'I just don't think it would be anything that macabre.' "

Stewart, of Richfield, Wash., said she believed that the FBI agent, who is based in Seattle, was misinformed and that the FBI in Washington "was not passing the information down the food chain."

Patrick Reuben, whose twin brother, Paul, was Crescent's medic, said he received a call from his 17-year-old niece Wednesday morning asking him whether her father was dead. Reuben, a suburban

Minneapolis police officer, called a reporter seeking more information.

"I can't get any information out of the government," he said.

FBI spokesman Richard Kolko declined to comment on complaints that the families were not being kept informed.

"The FBI's Office of Victim Assistance has offered its service to the U.S. families involved in this matter," Kolko said

It was unclear how U.S. authorities in Iraq obtained the fingers. The fingers were shipped to forensics specialists at Quantico, Va., for fingerprint and DNA analysis. Cote's, Reuben's and Withrow's were first identified. Those of Munns and Nussbaumer were identified later, according to a source.

The Crescent team was ambushed in broad daylight on Iraq's main highway while protecting a supply convoy. Crescent was under a contract to the Italian military, which was withdrawing its troops from the country. The company, which was later expelled from Iraq for weapons violations, came under withering criticism from U.S. officials and security experts for its lax safety measures. On the day of the attack, just seven security contractors were protecting a 37-truck convoy that stretched more than a mile.

From the beginning, the case has baffled U.S. investigators. The hostages have not been seen since a Jan. 3 video recorded by their captors, who identified themselves as an Iranian-backed group and called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. There have been no ransom demands.

Crescent's owner, Franco Picco, said Wednesday in a telephone interview from Kuwait that he continued to believe the hostages were alive.

"The fact is, what reason would they have to kill them, first and foremost?" he said. "And no one has found any bodies, you know? All the information we have tends us to believe that they are alive."

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