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Mar 14, 2008 6:23 am US/Central

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Families See Severed Fingers As Sign Of Hope

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Patrick Reuben doesn't like to think about someone cutting off his twin brother's finger. But 16 months after Paul Reuben and four other security workers were kidnapped in Iraq, the grim news that captors had sent severed fingers to U.S. officials has managed to renew a sense of hope.

"It shows that they've been alive recently," Reuben said Thursday.

The families of the missing workers have gotten little new information in the case, causing frustration and doubt that they will see their loved ones again. That seemed to change with reports that five severed fingers sent to the U.S. government matched the missing contractors' DNA.

The FBI and the State Department on Thursday declined to comment on the matter. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said only that officials "continue to demand these hostages' immediate release so that they can be returned safely to their families."

A U.S. government official in Washington said the fingers belonged to men abducted in two separate incidents that occurred a month and a half apart. The official spoke only on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak on the record about the matter.

Four of the men -- Paul Reuben, of Minneapolis; Jonathon Cote, of Getzville, N.Y.; Joshua Munns, of Redding, Calif.; and Bert Nussbaumer, of Vienna, Austria -- were guards for Crescent Security Group when men in Iraqi police uniforms ambushed their convoy near the Kuwaiti border on Nov. 16, 2006. The fifth, Ronald J. Withrow, of Lubbock, Texas, was a contractor working for JPI Worldwide when he was abducted earlier, on Jan. 5, 2007 near Basra.

John Young of Lee's Summit, Mo., was abducted with Reuben, Cote, Munns and Nussbaumer, but none of Young's fingers was sent to the U.S. military.

Young's mother, Sharon DeBrabander, said she's still hopeful her son will come home. She's tried to get information without much success, she said.

"I spend 10 hours a day, seven days a week on the phone to find answers. Everyone's life is turned upside down, but our kids' lives are much worse," she said.

Francis Cote, Jonathan Cote's father, said he and other families were visited by the FBI two to three weeks ago and told DNA samples had been identified as those of the hostages. The agents would not say how they had gotten the samples.

Before that, "we have no news, we have activity," had been the extent of officials' comments on the hostages, Cote said. "It's very vague."

Cote received calls Wednesday from Paul Reuben's wife, who was in tears, and Munns' mother. The hostages' families frequently contact each other to share news and compare notes, he said. Cote assured the women that the hostages were still alive.

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"It's possible they did sever (the fingers) to show proof of life," Cote said.

Patrick Reuben agreed, but he said his brother's 17-year-old twin daughters initially were told their father was dead. Then, he said, more information started coming in and the FBI told his family members that "the fingers were confirmed to be those of the hostages."

"I wish the government could say more to the families, but I think if they say too much, we get too hopeful, or they worry that we might pursue the information on our own," he said. "I've always been hopeful, but the reality of the situation has always been that it could go bad."

Casey Reuben, one of Paul's daughters, said she initially felt pain from the latest development, but she's chosen now to be optimistic. "I just pray that he's doing OK and that he's making it through each and every day. I just have hope that he's coming home," she said.

Munns' mother, Jackie Stewart of Ridgefield, Wash., said Thursday that she gave the FBI a DNA sample about a month ago. Stewart reasoned that it might be a positive development: In the harsh desert, DNA evidence could degrade quickly. So if the FBI had new DNA evidence, that might mean her son was alive.

"A couple weeks later they called me back and said yes, we did have a match," she said.

She said it's been difficult to accept that her son is missing a finger, just as it's been difficult not knowing what happened to him.

"If I think about it -- if they're feeding him, if they're pointing a gun at him, what they're doing to him -- if I dwell on it, it makes me sick," she said.

In Texas, Throw's mother, Barbara Alexander, told Lubbock television station KCBD that she found out while reading online news reports Thursday morning.

"I'm just ... beside myself," she told the station. "Whenever you are surprised by news like that ... you know, it just sends you way on back ... you're just backside."

Alexander said her son went to Iraq to work as a computer specialist. She said the FBI, victim's assistance and the State Department have contacted her about her son, but his employer, JPI Worldwide, has not. She said all she wants now is the whole truth and her son's safe return.

In Austria, Franz Nussbaumer said he was happy hearing about any sign that his brother

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Paul Reuben, shown here as a St. Louis Park Police officer, was captured by insurgents while working as private security contractor in Iraq. (File) AP

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