



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

News Release

December 3, 2004
Dean Boyd of ICE 202-616-6907
Gary Comerford of DCIS
703-604-8326

U.S. AND AUSTRIAN AUTHORITIES THWART IRANIAN ARMS PLOT

-- Iranian arms brokers who sought 3,000 U.S. military night vision systems arrested in Vienna --

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Michael J. Garcia, Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Joseph Schmitz, Defense Department Inspector General, today announced that U.S. and Austrian authorities have thwarted a plot to illegally supply the Iranian military with thousands of advanced military night vision systems from the United States.

As a result of a two-year, joint investigation by ICE, the Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS) and the Austrian Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism (Bundesamt Fur Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung or BVT), Austrian authorities have arrested two Iranian nationals, **Mahmoud Seif** and **Shahrzad Mir Gholikhan** for attempting to violate Austrian export laws.

Seif and Mir Gholikhan were arrested in Vienna, Austria, after a meeting in which they took possession of a U.S. helmet-mounted, Generation III military night vision system that they intended to illegally export to Iran. These transactions were to be the first involving a total of 3,000 Generation III military night vision systems that the defendants intended to purchase from the United States for illegal export to Iran. During conversations with U.S. and Austrian law enforcement officials over the course of the investigation, the defendants indicated that the night vision systems were intended for Iranian military infantry.

Generation III military night vision systems are among the most advanced in the world and are capable of amplifying virtually any light source, including faint starlight. Used by U.S. forces around the globe, these systems provide a significant advantage to U.S. troops over opponents in night-time combat. Because of their sophistication, these systems are classified as U.S. Munitions List items and their export from the United States is strictly prohibited without a valid export license from the U.S. State Department. Furthermore, all U.S. exports to Iran are prohibited under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act.

“Keeping sensitive U.S. weapons technology out of the hands of state sponsors of terror is a priority for ICE and the Department of Homeland Security,” said ICE Assistant Secretary Garcia. “Sophisticated night vision systems allow U.S. troops to ‘own the night,’ giving them a key advantage over their opponents during night-time combat. In the wrong hands, these night vision systems pose a threat to our troops around the world. I would like to thank the Austrian BVT for its outstanding efforts in this investigation.”

"The lives of American warfighters can be placed at direct risk through illegal transfer of military components in violation of the Arms Export Control Act. The protection of the American warfighter is the core mission of the DCIS, and as such, my office stands ready to deploy DCIS investigative resources, as necessary, to prevent any company from circumventing U.S. controls on technology transfer," said Defense Department Inspector General Schmitz.

The investigation began in August 2002, when agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS) in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, received information that a Tehran-based individual was attempting to purchase military-grade night vision systems in the United States for illegal export to Iran.

The original requests focused on the procurement of up to 3,000 units of helmet-mounted Generation III military night vision systems from the United States for export to Iran. The individual specified that the night vision systems were to be used by military infantry.

In September 2004, Mahmoud Seif and Shahrzad Mir Gholikhan began negotiations to purchase the military night vision systems from the United States. They indicated that they would receive the first night vision system and additional systems in Austria for export to Iran. They also noted their direct contacts with the Iranian government.

Based on this information, ICE and DCIS agents contacted the ICE Attaché in Austria to determine if the defendants' actions would constitute violations of European Union laws and enable Austrian authorities to make arrests. Austrian authorities determined that such transactions would violate their nation's export control laws. At this point, the Austrian Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism (BVT) joined the investigation.

On November 30, Mahmoud Seif and Shahrzad Mir Gholikhan arrived in Vienna to pick up the first military night vision system. They also provided a list of other items that they wished to be purchased from the United States. After taking possession of the first night vision system, the pair was arrested by Austrian BVT agents.

The arrest of these defendants was the result of a joint investigation by the ICE Resident Agent-in-Charge office in Fort Lauderdale, the ICE Attaché office in Vienna, Austria, the DCIS Resident Agency office in Fort Lauderdale, and the Austrian Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism (BVT).

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.