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Analysis: Did U.S. fumble chance to peer inside China's secretive leadership?

By Mark Hosenball | Reuters

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Information about a Chinese policeman who implicated the wife of a top Chinese official in a British businessman's murder was not circulated widely in Washington as he was considered of marginal intelligence value, current and former U.S. officials said.

In the weeks since Wang Lijun's visit to the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu and his subsequent detention, some critics of the Obama administration have accused it of fumbling what could have been one of the highest-level defectors ever from inside China's clannish leadership class.

Part of that criticism is based on a story line that upon reaching the consulate in Chengdu on February 6, Wang requested political asylum.

The administration's public line has been that Wang did not request asylum and left the consulate of his own accord.

However, some officials suggest that at some point, Wang at least may have hinted at a desire for asylum. And some U.S. officials say consultations were held at a high level in Washington before Wang left the consulate and surrendered to what he believed were friendly central government officials.

U.S. diplomats and intelligence officials said U.S. agencies were initially skeptical of Wang's stories and that one of his most sensational claims, involving an alleged murder, was not circulated in Washington to officials normally briefed on such information.

"We were not told about the murder (allegations) until much later," after stories describing Wang Lijun's visit to the consulate surfaced in the media, one U.S. official told Reuters.

This official and others said agencies in Washington dealing with the Wang case concluded that while intriguing, it was primarily a local sideshow involving individuals, including Wang himself, of questionable character and credibility.

LESS THAN A 'TREASURE TROVE'

Their bottom-line assessment was that the revelations from Wang, who had served as police chief and deputy mayor of Chongqing, another major provincial metropolis about 300 km (188 miles) from Chengdu, were less than the "treasure trove" media reports have described.

And while Wang's scandalous allegations surfaced just as China's Communist Party was preparing to anoint a new generation of leaders - including one of the principal targets of his claims - Washington concluded that they did not seriously threaten the party's control over the country.

Hence little consideration was given during Wang's 24-hour visit to the consulate to offering him U.S. government protection or secreting him out of the country.

Wang's allegations, directed principally against populist Chongqing party leader Bo Xilai and his wife, Gu Kailai, ruined Bo's hopes of ascending to the party's highest ruling body, a subcommittee of the Politburo.

However, according to U.S. intelligence assessments, while China's Communist Party faces traditional factional tensions, the long-term political fallout of Bo's downfall will be limited and there is little similarity with the upheaval that shook China during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

"From the U.S. government's point of view, what is the upside of getting involved in this?" said Brookings Institution scholar Kenneth Lieberthal, a former senior adviser on Asia to former Democratic President Bill Clinton.

U.S. officials said there were other reasons officers at the consulate ultimately arranged for, or persuaded, Wang to leave of his own accord and surrender to what Wang believed were sympathetic Chinese central government officials.

Wang believed that his life might be in jeopardy if he was taken into custody by his enemies from Chongqing, whom he believed to have traveled to Chengdu and surrounded the U.S. Consulate, current and former U.S. officials said.

However, he also believed that representatives of the Beijing central government would protect him because Beijing and Wang shared antagonists in Chongqing, the sources said.

CONSULAR OFFICIALS WARY OF WANG

The U.S. officials who spoke to Reuters said consular officials were also wary of Wang as for some time they had been hearing reports about alleged infighting and corruption among officials in Chongqing and Wang's personal reputation was not blemish-free.

They said that while U.S. agencies and diplomatic outposts maintain procedures for arranging asylum, and even clandestine escapes for dissidents in mortal danger, the bar is set extremely high for such extreme measures.

Wang's case did not come close to meeting that standard, officials said, because he was not regarded by U.S. officials as a target for, or a victim of, human rights abuses.

The U.S. officials said that when he arrived unexpectedly at the consulate, Wang told tales of political and financial intrigue involving Bo Xilai and his wife, Gu.

His most sensational disclosure was his claim that Gu had been involved in the alleged murder of Neil Heywood, a British businessman who had helped the couple's son, Bo Guagua, into Britain's elite Harrow boarding school.

Heywood died in a Chongqing hotel room in November; his body was cremated three days later. Gu is in custody and Bo has not been seen in public since March, when he was dismissed as boss of Chongqing. He was stripped of his Politburo seat last week.

The White House has kept a very tight lid on what transpired during Wang's visit to the consulate and it is still unclear how much detailed information he offered about the alleged murder.

William Hague, Britain's foreign secretary, confirmed in a statement to Parliament this week that Wang had divulged the alleged murder. The British government was briefed early on by U.S. officials about Wang's description of the alleged murder, U.S. and European officials said.

U.S. GOVERNMENT GUARDING DETAILS TIGHTLY

Current and former U.S. officials said Wang provided detailed allegations of corruption involving Bo and his wife. But the U.S. government is guarding these details tightly, with access to cable traffic about the matter blocked, even for top officials who would normally get to see such material.

The Republican-led House Foreign Affairs Committee has requested briefings and access to official documents on the case, but officials say the administration has provided Congress with only minimal information.

Some officials who have been briefed on Wang's disclosures said his material had been characterized as dense, arcane and confusing. One official said the material did not fall high on the scale of priorities for U.S. intelligence agencies' collection efforts on China, which appear to relate to the stability of the Communist government.

Several U.S. officials indicated Wang's hint at asylum was never treated with much enthusiasm by the Obama administration.

Michael Pillsbury, a former adviser on China to Republican presidents, said the U.S. administration's handling of the case would send a bad signal to human rights activists.

"I fear President Obama has sent the wrong message, and this decision will have a chilling effect on those who want to fight corruption, have important evidence, or have a well-founded fear of persecution," he said.

But Lieberthal said the Obama administration was correct to treat the whole affair with kid gloves - if not tongs.

"This is a Chinese on Chinese affair," with some British involvement, Lieberthal said.

Lieberthal said officials of the consulate allowed Wang to make calls to people he trusted, presumably in the central government, which resulted in him leaving and "walk(ing) out escorted by someone he trusted."

Lieberthal also said that as a police chief and city official under Bo in Chongqing, Wang was known as "not a lovable character."

(Editing By Warren Strobel and David Brunnstrom)

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