

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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From: OpsNewsTicker@state.gov [mailto:OpsNewsTicker@state.gov]
Sent: Thursday, October 18, 2012 5:50 PM
To: NEWS-Libya; NEWS-Mahogany
Subject: UPDATE: Libyan Islamist says he was at U.S. consulate during attack (Reuters)

BENGHAZI (Reuters) - A Libyan militia commander who U.S officials say is under investigation in connection with the attacks on the American consulate in Benghazi which led to the death of the ambassador said he was present during the incident but was not one of the ringleaders.

Some American newspapers have quoted unnamed Libyan officials as pointing to Ahmed Abu Khattala as the leader of the attacks on Sept. 11. The newspapers also reported that the officials said Abu Khattala's whereabouts were unknown.

U.S. government sources told Reuters that Abu Khattala is being investigated as a suspect in the Benghazi consulate attacks though U.S. investigators are not clear at this point if he played a role in leading or organising the attacks.

In an interview, Abu Khattala told Reuters he had only heard he was a suspect through news media and was surprised that officials had told journalists he was at large.

"These reports say that no one knows where I am and that I am hiding," he said. "But here I am in the open, sitting in a hotel with you. I'm even going to pick up my sister's kids from school soon."

Sitting with a friend in the restaurant of a Benghazi hotel, the 41-year-old, sporting a red felt hat and a full salt-and-pepper beard, laughed gently.

"There were many people there from Ansar al-Shariah, from other brigades and from the general public," the official, who refused to be named, said, referring to the hardline Islamist militia group which has been blamed for the attack.

"Just because someone is there doesn't mean they were behind it."

Abu Khattala denied being a leader of Ansar al-Shariah, but said he was friendly with the group and knew its membership well.

A U.S. official said there may be more than person taking a lead role in the group.

"Ansar al-Shariah is a factionalised militant group without one home address," the official told Reuters. "There may be several military commanders playing a role in its activities."

Abu Khattala said that on the night of Sept. 11, he received a phone call telling him that an attack on the U.S.

consulate was in progress and that he then went to the scene.

"I arrived at the street parallel to the consulate and waited for other brigade leaders to show me the way to the buildings," he said. "I arrived at the scene just like the others did -- to see what was happening."

He said that after he arrived at the consulate, he began to help direct traffic with other militia leaders.

"People were crashing into each other because of the chaos and there was sporadic shooting," he said.

Abu Khattala said he called the commanders of Benghazi's security forces -- the February 17 brigade and the Supreme Security Committee -- and told them to remove their cars and people from the consulate to avoid clashes.

"Soon after I made my calls, one of the guards told me that four men were detained in a building inside the compound who had been shooting at the demonstrators," he said.

"By the time I arrived at the building the men had already escaped. At that point I left the scene and didn't return."

Little is known about Abu Khattala, who hails from Benghazi.

Abu Khattala, who is unmarried, said he went to public schools in Libya but did not attend university or community college. He said he was imprisoned for a total of 10 years for "knowing suspected personalities". He refused to elaborate.

"I've also never left the country," he said when asked if he received any education or training abroad.

Abu Khattala said he formed the Obeidah al-Jarrah brigade at the beginning of the armed revolt which toppled Muammar Gaddafi last year.

The shadowy armed militia was blamed in the killing last July of military chief Abdelfattah Younes, a former Gaddafi loyalist who had defected to the rebels.

Younes was involved in the 1969 coup that brought Gaddafi to power. He was interior minister before he defected and took a senior position in the rebellion in February.

Some rebels, especially hard-line conservative Islamist fighters who were persecuted under Gaddafi, were never happy to serve under a man who had been so close to Gaddafi.

Abu Khattala was questioned by Libyan authorities but released because no evidence directly linked him to the killing. He said he later broke up his militia group.

"After the revolution Obeidah al-Jarrah was disbanded because we were a fighting group and the war was over in Benghazi," he said.

But many members of Obeidah al-Jarrah are known to have joined other brigades, including Ansar al-Shariah in Benghazi.

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