



Iran's Ahmadinejad Linked to Vienna Murder Probe

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VIENNA (Reuters) -- Austrian prosecutors have launched an investigation into whether Iran's president-elect was involved in the 1989 assassination of a Kurdish leader in Vienna, the Interior Ministry said on Tuesday.

A ministry spokesman confirmed that prosecutors had started a probe by asking the ministry's anti-terrorism task force to investigate the case, but declined to provide any details.

"The prosecutor's office has made the request," ministry spokesman Rudolf Gollia said.

Austrian Green Party security spokesman Peter Pilz told a news conference there was "credible evidence" that Iranian President-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was involved in the 1989 assassination of Iranian exile Kurdish opposition leader Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou and two other Kurdish politicians in Vienna.

"Yesterday the state prosecutor's office asked the Anti-Terrorism Task Force to begin an investigation into the allegations about the 1989 triple murder," Pilz told reporters.

In addition to Ahmadinejad, Pilz said former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was at the centre of the newly reopened investigation.

Pilz said it was up to the prosecutor's office to decide whether to request that Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad be questioned.

Iranian officials were not immediately available for comment. On Saturday a senior aide to Ahmadinejad in Tehran said Pilz's charges were "not even worth commenting on. It is like the other accusations and there will be more accusations."

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Pilz said his accusation was based on information he received from an Iranian journalist living in France who Pilz calls only "Witness D". Pilz gave this information to the Interior Ministry and the Anti-Terrorism Task Force, which then forwarded it to the state prosecutor's office for evaluation.

"I cannot personally say whether the allegations of Witness D are true, but I can say that they are credible," Pilz said.

Witness D's information came from one of the alleged gunmen, who contacted Witness D in 2001 but later drowned, Pilz said.

One of the reasons that Witness D appeared credible is that he knows details that only someone with access to Austrian investigators' classified files could know, he said.

Pilz said Witness D had no ties to any exiled Iranian political groups in France.

Many members of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) and its militant wing, the People's Mujahideen Organisation, are based in Paris. Both oppose Iran's Islamic government and are listed by the U.S. State Department as terrorist organisations.

Several former hostages who were held by Iranian militants after the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy have accused Ahmadinejad of taking part in the 444-day hostage drama which led Washington to break ties with Tehran.

The president-elect's office and several hostage-takers have denied Ahmadinejad helped storm the embassy. Pilz said that Witness D had no information to support the allegations that Ahmadinejad was involved in the U.S. hostage-taking.

By Louis Charbonneau