

U.S. Acknowledges Others' Efforts on Hostages

By Ann Devroy
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The Bush administration acknowledged yesterday that a variety of private individuals, foreign diplomats and others are trying to gain the release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon, but said none of the efforts has led to any indication that a hostage release is imminent.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, responding to what he said were a half-dozen recent reports about hostage-related developments, said, "there is a lot happening" behind the scenes independent of the U.S. government.

Repeating the denial that any U.S. official is directly involved in talks, Fitzwater said intermediaries such as businessmen in the region, diplomats of other nations, families of hostages and their employers and officials with Lebanese and Iranian contacts all have worked on the hostage problem. Some of these people, he said, "have had contacts with the U.S. government" and

"have told us what they are doing; they have asked us for advice."

But those efforts are not being made on behalf of the U.S. government nor are they directed by it, Fitzwater said. He said all intermediaries who contact the administration are told the Bush policy that hostages must be released without conditions. "No deals. If you can be helpful, fine, but keep in mind—this is our policy: no deals," Fitzwater said.

Eight Americans and 10 other Westerners are being held hostage in Lebanon. Most are believed held by Shiite Moslem factions loyal to Iran. Fitzwater repeated President Bush's inaugural call to Iran to release the hostages for the promise of U.S. "good will" to follow, and said the administration wants direct talks with Iran on the hostages.

Asked about movement on the issue, Fitzwater said, "We cannot say there is any movement. We know of no imminent release."

Speculation about possible release of the hostages, some of

whom have been held for five years, has been fueled by reports in Middle Eastern publications and by indications from Iranian leaders of a new willingness to discuss release.

The latest report quotes Syrian sources that Mahmoud Hashemi, a senior Iranian official, met Sunday in Damascus with Syria's foreign minister to "coordinate efforts" between Iran and Syria on release of the hostages. Hashemi, brother of Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, arrived in Damascus from Beirut, where he reportedly met with Shiite Moslem groups on the hostage issue.

State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler said the administration is "not aware of any... discussions that may be taking place in Syria on hostages." She reiterated Bush's denial over the weekend that he called French officials on the hostage issue, and Vice President Quayle's denial on Sunday that former secretary of state Cyrus R. Vance was officially negotiating hostage releases.

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