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Iraq says Iran confirms detaining three Americans

Sun Aug 9, 2009 9:42am EDT

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BAGHDAD (Reuters) - Iran has confirmed it has three Americans in custody after they crossed into Iranian territory from northern Iraq's Kurdish region last month, the Iraqi Foreign Minister said on Sunday.

Hoshiyar Zebari met Iran's ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, and asked for information about the U.S. citizens, whom Kurdish security officials say are tourists who strayed unwittingly into Iranian territory.

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"Yes, that's correct," Zebari said when asked whether he had met Iranian officials and if they had confirmed the U.S. citizens were in Iranian custody.

"We met the Iranian ambassador here and we raised the issue. These people were in Iraq and crossed the border, so we wanted information and they did not deny it," he said, adding that Qomi had confirmed they were being questioned.

Last week an Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said he could not confirm whether the Americans had been detained by Iran.

The tourists had been hiking at the Ahmed Awa tourist resort, renowned for its waterfalls, when they stumbled into Iran. There is no clear border marker between Iran and Iraq in that area.

Washington has asked the Swiss Embassy in Tehran, representing U.S. interests there, for assistance.

Iraq has strong ties to Iran and its arch-foe the United States, forcing Baghdad to handle the issue of the detentions delicately.

Iran's confirmation of the Americans' detention comes at a time of tense relations between the West and Tehran.

An Iranian court on Saturday charged a French woman, two Iranians working for the British and French embassies in Tehran and dozens of others with spying and aiding a Western plot to overthrow the country's clerical rule.

Iran accuses the West, particularly the United States and Britain, of fomenting trouble after a disputed presidential election in June. They deny the charge.

(Reporting by Mohammed Abbas, Writing by Yara Bayoumy, Editing by Michael Roddy)

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