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U.S. urges Iran to release three hikers: Jim Jones

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By [Susan Cornwell](#)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States has sent strong messages to Iran urging the release of three American hikers who were detained there recently, U.S. National Security Adviser Jim Jones said on Sunday.

"We have sent strong messages that we would like these three young people released as soon as possible, and also others that they have in their custody as well," Jones told NBC's "Meet the Press."

The Iranian government acknowledged on Sunday that it had the three Americans in

its custody, he said.

"These are innocent people. We want their families reunited, and we would like to have it done as quickly as possible," Jones said.

Iran detained the three Americans over a week ago after they strayed across the border from Iraq, according to an Iraqi Kurdish official.

Jones did not elaborate on others in Iranian custody. But in a separate interview, Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, mentioned Robert Levinson, an ex-FBI agent who disappeared in March 2007 during a business trip to Iran's Kish island.

"This (the hikers' case) is obviously of significant concern to us, as are the cases of other Americans who continue to be held in Iran. Mr. Robert Levinson, a number -- a couple of dual nationals who we're quite concerned about," Rice told CNN's "State of the Union."

"So we will continue to press for the swift and safe release of all Americans," Rice said.

In his interview, Jones said Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "is the figure of authority that we have to deal with" in Iran, despite the recent political turmoil there.

Ahmadinejad's recent re-election has sparked Iran's worst unrest since the 1979 Islamic revolution. At least 20 people were killed and hundreds were detained in the street unrest after the disputed June 12 poll.

U.S. President Barack Obama and the leaders of France, Britain, Italy and Germany have all decided not to congratulate Ahmadinejad on his re-election. Western governments are also locked in a dispute with Iran over its nuclear program, which Tehran says is for energy and the West suspects is for arms.

(Editing by Doina Chiacu)

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