

Venezuela says captured U.S. spy planned to sabotage power grid



Venezuela's Attorney General Tarek William Saab reveals failed attack aimed at overthrowing President Nicolas Maduro. (Photo: AP / Matias Delacroix)

Caracas, September 15 (RHC)-- Venezuela's chief prosecutor on Monday accused a recently arrested US citizen of spying and planning to sabotage oil refineries and electrical service in order to stir unrest and kill innocent people.

The man, said to have CIA ties, had help from three Venezuelan conspirators, who were arrested last week near a pair of oil refineries on the north Caribbean coast, Venezuela's Chief Prosecutor Tarek William Saab said on state television. He said that the U.S. spy's name is Matthew John Heath.

The prosecutor showed pictures of equipment seized from the group, including a grenade launcher, plastic explosives, a satellite phone and a bag full of U.S. dollars. Authorities said mobile phones taken

from the men when they were arrested last week include images of a large bridge in Zulia state and oil refineries in Falcon state.

"Everything here could qualify as a lethal weapon designed to cause harm and to promote assassinations, crimes against the people of Venezuela," said Saab, who also accused the man of planning to open a drug-trafficking route through Venezuela.

President Nicolas Maduro announced on Friday that an unnamed suspected US spy had been captured, saying he was a Marine and former CIA operative in Iraq. U.S. authorities have not commented on the case. The Associated Press was unable to make immediate contact with Heath, a lawyer or a relative representing him for comment on the accusations.

Heath reportedly told Venezuelan authorities that he wanted to speak with someone from the U.S. Embassy in Caracas.

The U.S. citizen is accused of entering Venezuela illegally, the prosecutor said, adding that he did not have a passport but rather had a copy of it hidden in one of his shoes. The three Venezuelans accused of conspiring with Heath include a military officer, Saab said, adding that they helped him enter from Colombia.

Saab said Heath had worked as a mercenary in Iraq from 2006 to 2016 for MVM Inc, a Virginia-based private security contracting company. The firm did not immediately respond to phone and e-mail messages seeking comment.

The arrest follows a failed beach incursion in early May that landed two ex-Green Beret soldiers in a Venezuelan jail for participating in a failed attempt to overthrow the socialist government.

The two former U.S. special forces soldiers were arrested along with more than 80 rebel Venezuelan fighters who staged a failed beach attack called Operation Gideon aimed at arresting Maduro.

The operation mounted from makeshift training camps in neighbouring Colombia left several rebels dead. It was orchestrated by Jordan Goudreau, an American citizen and three-time Bronze Star recipient who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The ex-Green Berets in Goudreau's force -- Luke Denman and Airan Berry -- have been sentenced to 20 years in prison. Authorities said the two men confessed to being part of the plot.

While the Trump administration denied having anything to do with the bungled May incursion, Washington backs Venezuelan opposition politician Juan Guaido as the country's legitimate leader in place of Maduro.

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