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Senate spy expert says defection story is true

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By Bill Gertz
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Despite White House denials, a congressional intelligence expert yesterday confirmed recent reports that a senior Soviet intelligence officer has defected to the United States.

Senate Intelligence Committee member Chic Hecht, Nevada Republican, confirmed that a high-level Soviet defection had occurred but would not provide details on who the defector is or when he defected.

"Where there's smoke, there's fire, and I'm sorry about the leak — [that] the story came into print," Mr. Hecht said of the reported defection. "There's been too many leaks, and here's another leak."

U.S. News & World Report and The New York Times last weekend reported that a high-ranking KGB official, believed to be a major general, defected in late April or early May by escaping from East Germany.

Asked if the reports mistakenly referred to the reported defection of a GRU general who left the Soviet Union in 1983, but whose jump to the West remains unconfirmed by U.S. officials, Mr. Hecht, a former intelligence operative, declined to comment.

The Washington Times reported yesterday that some intelligence experts believe the high-ranking defector referred to in recent press reports is the Soviet GRU military intelligence officer — identified in press reports as "Lt. Gen. Grishin" — who defected in September 1983 in Istanbul, Turkey, disguised in the uniform of a low-ranking Soviet military officer.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes flatly denied news reports that the CIA was concealing the defection last year of a high-ranking Soviet KGB intelligence official.

Referring to the U.S. News report, Mr. Speakes yesterday told reporters, "That story is not correct." Pressed for details, Mr. Speakes said "the whole thing" is incorrect.

U.S. News Senior Editor James C. Killpatrick defended the magazine's report in a statement issued yesterday. He said several sources confirmed the story and that one source warned the magazine to expect an official denial of the report.

A New York Times spokesman in New York referred questions about the Times' Sunday story to the Washington bureau. Washington bureau officials could not be reached for comment.

Two knowledgeable U.S. intelligence sources reached Sunday by The Washington Times would not confirm or deny the reports but expressed skepticism that the reported high-ranking defection was true.

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House Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton, Indiana Democrat, would not comment yesterday on the reported defection, although on Sunday he told reporters he had received a preliminary report on the subject but was uncertain about the information supplied to the committee.

Senate Intelligence Committee spokesman Dave Holliday said the committee checked with the CIA on the reports and concluded there is "no information to indicate that there is any substance to that story." He said he had no information about the GRU general.

CIA spokesman Kathy Pherson yesterday repeated the official CIA position that the agency does not comment publicly about defectors.

But a CIA official, speaking at a background briefing, said that both U.S. News and The New York Times were informed that the agency had no knowledge of the alleged KGB general.

"It's a little disappointing to ... say to The New York Times we don't know of any such guy and then in the Sunday morning paper they end up quoting people who are willing to say 'the CIA leaked this so they can deny it and continue resettling defectors,' " the official said.

The New York Times, quoting congressional sources, reported that some officials believe the agency put out the story about the KGB general in response to news reports that the White House planned to shift responsibility for defectors from the CIA to the FBI following the redefection of Soviet KGB official Vitaly Yurchenko.

Mr. Yurchenko disappeared last November and then charged the CIA with kidnapping and drugging him during three months in agency custody. The affair has led to congressional and administration reviews of CIA procedures for handling defectors.

The CIA official said the agency does not "play those kinds of games" with the news media.

"Basically, it seems to me that somebody is pushing this story," the CIA official said. "I don't know who it is; I don't know where it's coming from."

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