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Carter reveals details of Americans escape from Iran

TOKYO

Former President Jimmy Carter, at a news conference Tuesday, said CIA agents helped Canadian diplomats smuggle six Americans out of Iran while 52 others were being held hostage by Iranian militants.

The six had escaped and fled to the Canadian Embassy when militants of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary Islamic regime seized the U.S. Embassy and hostages on Nov. 4, 1979.

Canada informed the United States and Carter said, "I directed that intelligence agencies, primarily the CIA, begin to go into Tehran with disguises - sometimes as a motion picture crew, sometimes otherwise - to go privately into the Canadian Embassy and train these six Americans and the Canadians on how they might best be extracted from Tehran."

He described Ken Taylor, who was then the Canadian ambassador to Iran, as "justifiably an American hero."

Carter is on a six-day, private visit to Japan and made the remarks at a news conference.

Taylor, now the Canadian consul general in New York, told The Associated Press that the U.S. intelligence agents "made a vital contribution" to the escape of the six Americans who flew out of Tehran on Jan. 28, 1980, with forged Canadian passports and visas. The 52 Americans were released through Algerian-sponsored mediation and left Tehran Jan. 20, 1981, after 444 days as hostages.

Taylor said there were "two or three" CIA agents who worked with Canadian officials in Tehran organizing the escape of the six Americans.

"The CIA people who contributed to the effort were experts in documentation," he said. "They made a vital contribution in putting the visas into place."

Taylor said he was still not "entirely free" to discuss the episode, because it involved "an agency and department of the U.S. government," and he did not know why Carter chose to speak about it at this time.

The Americans left Tehran on a morning flight with Canadian diplomatic personnel and Taylor departed on an evening flight. The Canadian Embassy in the Iranian capital then was closed, but the two countries have not severed diplomatic relations.

Carter, discussing the CIA agents who entered Tehran to assist the Canadians, said one using a West German passport was stopped by an immigration official but then got through by recalling Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler.

He said the agent showed his passport, which carried the middle initial "H." to the Iranian official who told him, "Stop. Something's wrong."

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The official then said "I have been here 25 years and I have never seen a German passport with a middle initial, so I'll have to find out something more about you before you can pass," Carter told the news conference.

He said the "very quick-thinking CIA agent went back and said, 'Well, I wonder if I could talk to you privately' " and he then told the official, " ' I was born in the late 1930s, and my parents gave me the middle name of Hitler, and I've always gotten permission to conceal this fact in my passport."

Carter said the official then told the agent, "Well, I understand. You go right ahead."

The former chief executive also spoke of the attempted rescue mission that he sent to Iran on April 24, 1980. Eight Sea Stallion helicopters and six C-130 transport planes landed in an Iranian desert 250 miles southeast of Tehran before 300 commandos were to enter the Iranian capital to try to free the hostages.

The mission was abandoned when technical problems forced three of the helicopters to drop out, and eight U.S. servicemen were killed when a helicopter crashed into a C-130 as the aircraft prepared to leave the Iranian airstrip.

Carter was asked what he might have done differently, and he replied, "I would have sent one more helicopter to the desert rescue mission."