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# Reporter's release hinted as Mideast tension rises

Compiled by staff writers

A high-level source in the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence reportedly said Tuesday that Iran would unconditionally free American reporter Gerald Seib within 48 hours.

This report, from the Tehran correspondent of the South-North News Service, comes as a small sign of hope amid growing tensions throughout the Middle East.

United States naval forces mounted a show of strength in the region Tuesday amid continuing terrorist threats against American and other foreign hostages in Lebanon. Meanwhile, concern continued to mount over the safety of Anglican envoy Terry Waite, who has been missing since Jan. 20.

In Tehran, officials told the South-North News Service that Mr. Seib, a correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, would be released to the Swiss Embassy. The officials gave no immediate explanation for the alleged decision to free the American reporter.

Seib's release would represent a sudden reversal by Iran's Intelligence Ministry. Only Monday, a source there said Seib had behaved like a spy rather than a journalist during his 10 days in Iran and had gathered intelligence information too sensitive to be let out of the country. Yesterday, Tehran Radio said that Seib was being held as a "spy of the Zionist regime [i.e., Is-

rael]." Iran's Islamic Republic News Agency had said during the weekend that a "spy of the Zionist regime" was arrested after entering the country with a false passport and disguised as a journalist. It did not identify the person by name or nationality.

In Washington, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said Tuesday that Iranian authorities had refused to allow Swiss diplomats to see Seib under detention in Tehran. The Swiss mission in Tehran represents American interests in Iran. Mr. Fitzwater told reporters, "We don't know anyone who has talked to him or seen him."

An official from the Journal said yesterday his paper was trying to work through Iranian and other diplomatic channels to gain Seib's release. Journal chairman Warren Phillips called Seib's detention a "dreadful mistake" and said he had been seized "without any cause at all." There has also been speculation that Seib's seizure was part of a power struggle in Tehran.

In Tehran, the Intelligence Ministry source, quoted by the US-based South-North News Service - which reports on third world developments - said yesterday that "mistakes and misunderstandings played a major role in Mr. Seib's detention."

Discussing the alleged decision, the source said that "the humble approach of the White House, the State Department, and officials of the Wall Street Journal were unprecedented and paved the way for Mr. Seib's release."

Some Iranian political sources say they believe freeing the correspondent may encourage the US to take steps toward normalizing relations with Iran.

If Seib were to be released unconditionally, it would no doubt be a welcome relief to Washington, which in recent months has appeared to bargain to gain release of Americans. Last September, reporter Nicholas Daniloff was released from detention in Moscow after the US freed an accused Soviet spy. In November, it was revealed that the US was delivering arms to Iran in part to secure the release of Americans held in Lebanon.

The ministry source denied that Seib's arrest had any connection with problems existing between Iran and the US. He mentioned particularly Iran's demands for freeing assets of about \$8 billion frozen by the US and its hopes for getting additional US weapons.

Meanwhile, in Lebanon, a Muslim political source told Reuters news agency that Mr. Waite was being held in west Beirut, contrary to some media reports that he had been moved to the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon.

"All the information indicates he is still held in west Beirut and has not been moved out," the source said.

On Monday, radical pro-Iranian Shiite leader Hussein Musawi denied reports that Waite had been taken to the valley. Mr. Musawi challenged the US over its moves in the Mediterranean. He defied the US to send men to Lebanon to "have face-to-face combat with our Muslim fighters" and said the US would pay dearly for any military attack.

The Muslim kidnappers of three Americans and an Indian taken hostage Jan. 24 reportedly said they moved the captives out of Beirut because they believe the US plans to attack Lebanon in a bid to free hostages. On Tuesday the kidnappers, and Muslim leaders in Lebanon, warned that any US military action would mean death for the captives.