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Wall Street Journal Correspondent Is Detained by Iranian Authorities

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON — Iranian authorities have detained an American reporter, Gerald F. Seib of The Wall Street Journal.

"Jerry Seib is a highly respected foreign correspondent, and there can be no basis for his detention," said Norman Pearlstine, the Journal's managing editor. "We are seeking explanations through Iranian and other diplomatic channels. We hope any confusion will be cleared up and we are requesting his immediate release from detention and from Iran."

Mr. Seib was one of 57 foreign correspondents who last week were invited by the Iranian government to tour the front lines of Iran's war with Iraq. Along with a Swiss diplomat, he was ordered into a van in front of his hotel in Tehran about 6 p.m. Saturday.

Iran's official Islamic Republic News Agency, or IRNA, reported Saturday evening that "a spy of the Zionist regime" had entered Iran with a false passport, disguised as a journalist. But the three-paragraph report, monitored in Cyprus, did not give the name or nationality of the alleged spy.

Mr. Pearlstine said: "We are aware of an Iranian news-agency report on Saturday claiming that an Israeli spy has been arrested in Tehran. We want to emphasize that this report cited no name or nationality. Moreover, the report says the person arrested entered Iran with a false passport and posing as a journalist. Jerry Seib entered Iran legally on a valid U.S. passport and is obviously a well-known and well-respected journalist. We see no reason to link Mr. Seib's detention with the Iranian news-agency report."

In Washington, State Department spokesman Bruce Ammerman said: "We're aware of the report, we are looking into it, and we're in touch with the Swiss." In a statement, the State Department said: "From official diplomatic sources we do not know why Mr. Seib has been detained." The statement added: "The department urges that Mr. Seib be released immediately and allowed to depart from Iran forthwith."

Mr. Seib, 30 years old, is a native of Kansas and a graduate of Thomas More Prep High School, a Roman Catholic preparatory school, and of the University of Kansas. He joined the Journal upon graduation in 1978 and worked in the paper's Dallas and Washington bureaus. He and his wife, Barbara Rosewicz, also a Journal reporter, were assigned to cover the Middle East from a base in Cairo in January 1985.

Mr. Seib and the other reporters invited to Iran were issued five-day visas, which most of them overstayed because their tours of the war front were delayed. Mr. Seib's visa was issued in Frankfurt at the request of the Iranian interest section attached to the Algerian Embassy in Washington.

When Mr. Seib and several other journalists applied for an extension on Thursday so they could depart on the weekend, only Mr. Seib had difficulty getting one. Iranian officials confiscated his passport.

In his hotel room, Mr. Seib received a series of telephone calls from a man who identified himself as "Jallali," who told him there was a minor problem with his visa that could not be settled until after the Moslem sabbath, which falls on Friday.

Mr. Seib told his editors in New York that "Jallali" told him his name resembled that of someone being sought by Iranian authorities, and told him the confusion would be resolved when he reported to the Iranian Immigration Department Saturday. Mr. Seib said the Iranian Foreign Ministry offered the same explanation for the confusion.

But when Mr. Seib reported to the immigration office Saturday morning, officials didn't produce his passport or an explanation for the problem.

Mr. Seib spent several hours that day at the home of a Swiss diplomat. Switzerland represents U.S. interests in Iran, with which the U.S. has no diplomatic relations. He returned to his hotel late Saturday afternoon with another Swiss diplomat. As he left the hotel with the diplomat, both were detained. The Swiss diplomat was released shortly.

Three other American journalists in Tehran at the time were allowed to leave early Sunday.

Two other Americans currently are being held in Iran. John Patts, a 50-year-old engineer who works for a company in Bethesda, Md., was seized last summer and Tehran newspapers have claimed he has confessed to spying for the Central Intelligence Agency. The State Department disclosed last month that a second American had been imprisoned in Iran. But at his family's request, the department has refused to divulge his identity or to provide details of his arrest.