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Sent: Sunday, January 29, 2012 07:20 PM
To: NEWS-H; NEWS-Mahogany; NEWS-L; NEWS-DRL; NEWS-Egypt; NEWS-CA; NEWS-NEA
Subject: U.S. Embassy in Cairo shelters NGO workers (Washington Post)

CAIRO (Washington Post) — The American embassy in Cairo on Sunday took the highly unusual step of sheltering U.S. citizens employed by nongovernmental organizations amid fears that they could be detained as part of a crackdown on pro-democracy groups, according to U.S. officials and a former NGO official.

The move comes a week after Sam LaHood, the country director of the International Republican Institute, was barred from boarding an international flight in Cairo. LaHood is the son of U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. Several other NGO workers later learned that they had also been barred from leaving the country.

Moving the Americans into the neighborhood-size diplomatic compound in the center of the capital appeared to mark a dramatic worsening in Washington's relationship with Cairo, which has been strained over the past year as the country's ruling generals have sought to portray foreigners as agents of instability.

A senior State Department official said Sunday afternoon that a "handful of U.S. citizens have opted to stay in the embassy compound in Cairo while awaiting permission to depart Egypt."

The official, who was not allowed to discuss the matter on the record, would not say whether LaHood was among those at the embassy, citing privacy rules. The official did not elaborate on the threat that prompted the embassy to open its doors to some of those targeted in an Egyptian investigation into the work of the organizations.

"They weren't in immediate physical danger, that we are aware of," the official added.

Egyptian authorities last month raided the offices of several U.S.-funded organizations, including IRI, the National Democratic Institute and Freedom House. The groups train Egyptian politicians and political parties and promote accountability and transparency in governance.

A former IRI official who has followed the case closely said Sunday that his former colleagues had indicated

they would take shelter at the embassy only as a last resort, if they had reason to believe their arrest might be imminent. The former official spoke on the condition of anonymity because he is no longer a representative of the group.

Egyptian authorities have been examining the practices of dozens of Egyptian and foreign civil society organizations that receive foreign funding, saying they are operating without permission from the government. Such organizations have for years operated openly, but unofficially, because the government has not allowed them to register as NGOs.

LaHood said in an e-mail Sunday afternoon that he was still barred from leaving the country.

“Nothing has budged in our legal case,” he wrote. “Office still sealed, still on travel ban.”

He did not respond to an e-mail sent hours later inquiring about personnel who sought protection at the embassy, and his cellphone appeared to have been switched off.

IRI officials in Washington could not be reached for comment. Kathy Gest, a spokeswoman for the National Democratic Institute, said the organization’s staff in Cairo had not relocated.

The case has raised alarms in the Obama administration. President Obama called Egypt’s military ruler, Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, recently to express concern about the government’s probe. State Department officials and U.S. lawmakers have made it clear to Egyptian officials that the crackdown could imperil future U.S. aid to Egypt, which for years has received roughly \$1.3 billion annually, mostly in military assistance.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland on Friday told reporters in Washington that the United States has urged the Egyptian government to resolve its investigation promptly, lift the travel ban and develop a mechanism to allow NGOs to register.

“This harassment is counterproductive to the larger goal of Egyptians being able to get where they want to go, which is a more democratic, open, prosperous Egypt,” she said.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry on Sunday responded to U.S. media reports that said lobbying firms in Washington abruptly dropped the country as a client over the crackdown on NGOs. The ministry said in a statement that the Egyptian government, not the lobbyists, had canceled the contract to save money.

The developments came as Egyptians cast ballots on the first day of the election for the upper house of parliament. In sharp contrast to the first day of voting for the lower house in November, when people lined up for blocks and voted in record numbers, polling stations were largely empty Sunday.

Voters and those who abstained from the polls Sunday cited a sense of weariness about the complex, staggered election process that is expected to conclude next month.

Egyptians see parliamentary elections as the first key test of the country's transition to democracy after three decades of autocratic rule by former president Hosni Mubarak. But many say they have grown cynical about the promise of elections as the mood in Egypt has soured amid continuing clashes, protests and deepening economic stagnation.

Islamist parties won more than 70 percent of seats in the lower house of parliament, which was seated last week. The upper house, known as the Shura Council, is a consultative body that can weigh in on constitutional issues but otherwise has little authority. Mubarak had used the Shura Council to rubber-stamp his administration's initiatives. Political analysts said that Islamists are widely expected to take control of the council.

"There's a sense of resignation that Islamists will get the majority of votes," said Mustapha Kamel el-Sayed, a political science professor at Cairo University, suggesting that probably affected turnout. "There's also election fatigue. Egyptians have been going to elections for the past six weeks, and I think they are fed up with too many elections."

Fatma Mohammad Ibrahim, 62, was among the few voters at a polling station near the Nile River in downtown Cairo about noon.

"I put my country above everything," she said, standing next to her husband. "I'm old and sick, but I'm here for my country's sake."

Menna el-Tohamy, 22, a university student, said she found out about the latest round of voting only on Saturday. She said she decided not to vote because she didn't have time to learn about the candidates.

"Maybe we got depressed" after the initial phase, which saw a record turnout, she said. "We're still in the same situation."

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