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FBI has data stolen from North Korea embassy by anti-regime group

A group calling for the overthrow of Kim Jong Un has given the FBI data seized in a raid of North Korea's embassy in Spain, a law enforcement source says.



A member of the North Korea's embassy tells reporters not to take pictures of the diplomatic building in Madrid, Spain, on March 13, 2019. Bernat Armangué / AP file
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WASHINGTON — An opposition group that stormed the North Korean embassy in Spain last month says it handed over data stolen from the raid to the FBI, and a law enforcement source familiar with the matter confirmed to NBC News that the bureau has received the information.

Receiving intelligence [stolen from a foreign embassy in a NATO country](#) puts the FBI in a delicate position, but there is no U.S. legal prohibition against the American government making use of the material, legal experts say.

Given the opaque nature of [North Korea's security-obsessed regime](#), getting hold of information kept at one of its embassies could prove "pretty significant," said one former

U.S. intelligence officer who spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

North Korean embassies are prime targets of digital spying by the National Security Agency, current and former intelligence officials say. But [North Korea](#) is also known to use non-electronic, old-fashioned communication methods, so information on paper from the embassy could be valuable.

[Thae Yong Ho](#), a former North Korean diplomat who defected to South Korea in 2016, [recently wrote](#) on his website that the intruders might have seized decryption computers that could unlock secret communications between embassies and Pyongyang.



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The decryption devices are "considered more important than human lives," and their removal would represent "critical harm" to the regime, said Thae, the former deputy head of the North Korean embassy in Britain.

Spanish authorities have [accused](#) a 10-member gang of entering the embassy on Feb. 22 under a false pretext, beating and tying up the staff, trying unsuccessfully to persuade an accredited North Korean diplomat to defect, and making off with computers and digital files.

The anti-regime group, Free Joseon, or Free Korea, has claimed responsibility for the intrusion, though it denies beating or gagging any of the embassy personnel. The group, also known as Cheollima Civil Defense, portrays itself as a movement to liberate North Korea from an "immoral and illegitimate regime."

The group [said](#) on Tuesday it had no contact with any foreign government before the intrusion but said it had offered information of "enormous potential value to the FBI" after the raid.

Spain has issued two international arrest warrants in the case, one for a Mexican national residing in the U.S., Adrian Hong Chang, and the other for an American citizen. After lifting

a secrecy order in the case, a Spanish investigating judge revealed the identities of seven of the alleged 10 intruders in a court document on Tuesday. It remained unclear if the Spanish government identified the suspects in the raid through their own investigation or whether U.S. authorities had passed on the names of the alleged intruders.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump begin a historic summit at a hotel on Sentosa island in Singapore on June 12, 2018. Saul Loeb / AFP - Getty Images file

The group has alleged the U.S. betrayed its trust after members approached the FBI.

"The organization shared certain information of enormous potential value with the FBI in the United States, under mutually agreed terms of confidentiality," the group said on its website. "This information was shared voluntarily and on their request, not our own. Those terms appear to have been broken."

Lee Wolosky, an attorney for Free Joseon and a former U.S. envoy for Guantanamo, told NBC News that "when all the facts come out regarding Madrid, it will be clear that the Spanish judge reached a number of inaccurate conclusions."

"Certainly the decision of the Spanish judge to publicly disclose the names of those working in opposition to the Kim regime — which routinely assassinates its adversaries — was irresponsible and put these individuals in unnecessary jeopardy."

The FBI and the CIA declined to comment.

The embassy of Spain in Washington did not respond to requests for comment.



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Experts who follow Korea and former intelligence officials said the members of the group had reason to fear for their lives given the track record of Kim Jong Un's regime, which has not hesitated to hunt down defectors and other opponents.

"They've become a bullseye target," said Sung-Yoon Lee of The Fletcher School at Tufts University.

"Who in the future would collaborate with the U.S. government were they ever to come into possession of high-value intelligence on North Korea obtained illegally?"