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The Associate Press

Cypriot police say Russian spying suspect vanished

By *MENELAOS HADJICOSTIS*

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LARNACA, Cyprus – Cypriot police began searching late Wednesday for an alleged Russian spy wanted in the United States who vanished after being released on bail a day earlier in the Mediterranean island nation.

Police spokesman Michalis Katsounotos said Christopher Robert Metsos, 54, who says he is Canadian, failed to report to police in the southern coastal town of Larnaca between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. local time (1500GMT and 1700GMT; 11:00 a.m. EDT and 1:00 p.m. EDT) Wednesday according to the terms of release imposed on him Tuesday by a Cypriot court.

Katsounotos said a search failed to locate Metsos and authorities have begun the procedures to issue a warrant for his arrest for breaching the terms of his release.

Andreas Pastellides, one of two lawyers representing Metsos in Cyprus, told the Associated Press that they'd had no contact with their client since Tuesday afternoon.

Pastellides said Metsos did not show up for a meeting he was supposed to have Wednesday afternoon in Larnaca with Pastellides' partner, Michalis Papathanasiou.

Metsos' quick disappearance raised questions about why Cypriot authorities released him on bail.

"I'm truly surprised that the court issued no such detention order against an individual who is alleged to be a spy," said Ionas Nicolaou, member of parliament for the opposition Disy party and chairman of parliament's Legal Affairs Committee. "By virtue of the fact that this individual was suspected of being a spy, I don't think his conditional release was justified. Of course, I can't know exactly what facts or arguments were presented before the court for that decision to be taken."

But Pastellides defended the bail request.

"We objected to our client's detention because he did not wish to be detained until his extradition," Pastellides said. "Yes, it was a serious case, but God forbid if someone remains detained for a month until extradition proceedings can begin."

Pastellides said he was not surprised that the judge freed Metsos, saying that his partner Papathanasiou, who represented Metsos in court, convinced the judge his detention wasn't necessary by pointing out Metsos' willingness to surrender his travel documents, appear once a day at a local police station and pay bail of about euro26,500 (\$32,500).

Dean Boyd, spokesman for the U.S. Justice Department's national security division, said he was aware of the media reports regarding Metsos, but is "going to have to defer to Cyprus authorities for comment."

A spokesman at FBI headquarters in Washington, William Carter, said the bureau is aware of press reports on the Metsos matter "and we are not commenting at this time."

Metsos had been staying at a hotel in Larnaca.

Metsos could have slipped into the Turkish Cypriot north of the island, which is recognized by no country other than Turkey and has no formal extradition treaties with other countries. The north is linked to Turkey by an airport and ferry services. There are no direct air links to any other country other than Turkey, but a ferry service also runs between the northern port of Famagusta and Latakia, Syria.

The north has had a reputation for acting as a refuge for Britons fleeing justice in their homeland. Crossings between the north and south of the island were forbidden until 2003, when authorities on both sides relaxed restrictions. Since 2003, there have been hundreds of thousands of crossings from both sides across six crossing points.

Cyprus was split into an internationally recognized Greek Cypriot south and a breakaway Turkish Cypriot north in 1974 when Turkey invaded in response to a short-lived coup by supporters of union with Greece.

Metsos was arrested early Tuesday at Larnaca airport as he tried to board a flight for Budapest, Hungary. His arrest was based on a notice issued by Interpol, the international police agency.

Katsounotos had said that Metsos arrived on the island June 17. Cypriot authorities received the Interpol arrest warrant on June 25.

In the past, the east Mediterranean island has been known as a regional hub for spies from across the Mideast, as it straddles the meeting point of three continents — Europe, Africa and Asia. It lies in far eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, a mere 45 miles or so from the southern coast of Turkey, about 110 miles from Syria and 145 miles from Lebanon.