WikiLeaks: Israel charged bribes for Gaza access

JOSEF FEDERMAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

A U.S. diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks on Thursday quoted American officials as saying a key Israeli cargo crossing for goods entering the Gaza Strip was rife with corruption.

The June 14, 2006, cable, published Thursday by Norway's Aftenposten daily, says major American companies told U.S. diplomats they were forced to pay hefty bribes to get goods into Gaza. It was unclear whether the practice still continues.

There was no immediate comment from Israel.

The document quoted a local Coca-Cola distributor as saying he was asked to pay more than $3,000 to get a truckload of merchandise through the Karni crossing. The executive claimed an unidentified "high-level official" at the crossing headed the corruption ring.

"Corruption extends to Karni management and involves logistics companies working as middlemen for military and civilian officials at the terminal," the document says.

The executive was identified as Joerg Hartmann, with Coca-Cola's distributor in the West Bank. The company did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

The cable says other companies, including Proctor & Gamble, Caterpillar, Philip Morris, Westinghouse, Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, Aramex and Dell, had complained of corruption at the crossing. It was not clear which companies had actually paid the bribes, though the document said Caterpillar executives refused to pay.

The alleged corruption occurred a year before Hamas overran Gaza and Israel imposed an economic blockade. At that time, however, Israeli-Palestinian violence frequently closed the border crossings.

Hartmann told U.S. diplomats that the cost of the bribes would rise after extended closures of the border.

The document was identified as a "joint cable" by the U.S. ambassador to Israel in Tel Aviv and the American consul-general in Jerusalem, who works closely with the Palestinians. The embassy had no immediate comment.

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