**UN Hariri investigators say they identify suspects**

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UNITED NATIONS, July 12 (Reuters) - U.N. investigators probing the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri have identified a number of people who may have been involved or known about it, their chief reported on Thursday.

New information about a van used to blow up Hariri and 22 others in Beirut in February 2005, about mobile phones used to track him and about Hariri's political activities had helped to pinpoint suspects, Belgian prosecutor Serge Brammertz said.

The role of Hariri, who became a prominent critic of Syria, in support of a 2004 U.N. resolution demanding that Syrian and other foreign troops withdraw from Lebanon had emerged as a likely motive, he said in a report to the Security Council.

In the eighth report so far by the U.N. team, Brammertz said that since the last one in March, investigators had clarified their findings by condensing some 120,000 document pages into reports totaling 2,400 pages.

That effort "has helped identify a number of persons of particular interest who may have been been involved in some aspect of the preparation and execution of the attack" on Hariri or had prior knowledge of it, he said.

Brammertz did not name any suspects in his report, which also expressed concern that deteriorating security in Lebanon could hamper the continuing U.N. inquiry, which will eventually hand over to a court approved by the Security Council in May.

The report said the Mitsubishi Canter van in which a suicide bomber is believed to have set off some 1,800 kg (4,000 lbs) of explosives was stolen in the Japanese city of Kanagawa in October 2004, then shipped to the United Arab Emirates.

From there it was sent in December to a showroom near the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli and sold. The U.N. team "has recently acquired information regarding the sale of the van to individuals who could be involved in the final preparation of the van for the attack," Brammertz said.

The investigation had also established that individuals who had used six cellular phone SIM cards to spy on Hariri before his killing had also "played a critical role in the planning and execution of the attack itself," the report said.

"The (inquiry) Commission has established the origin of the SIM cards and is finalizing its understanding of the circumstances around the sale of the cards and a number of handsets to the individuals who made use of them."

POLITICAL KILLING

The U.N. team, which has already said Hariri's killing was political, said it was now focusing on his role as an advocate of Security Council resolution 1559, which urged foreign troop withdrawals from Lebanon and the disbanding of militias there.

"While some events surrounding the adoption of resolution 1559 need to be further investigated, the Commission's working hypothesis is that these events played an important role in shaping the environment in which the motives to assassinate Rafik Hariri emerged," it said.

The report had little new on the bomber, whose identity is not known. But it confirmed that Lebanon-based Palestinian Ahmed Abu Adass, who appeared in a video claiming responsibility for the killing, had not carried it out.

Brammertz said that what he called the bleak security outlook in Lebanon had had "several negative effects" on his team and could restrict its investigating ability, muzzle witnesses and hinder the recruitment of staff.

Brammertz, who is also investigating with less intensity 17 other political murders or attempted murders in Lebanon, said Syria's cooperation remained "generally satisfactory."

The Belgian has not repeated allegations by his German predecessor, Detlev Mehlis, that Hariri could not have been killed without the complicity of senior Syrian officials, and his relations with Damascus have been better.

Brammertz, whose current mandate expires at the end of this year, is considered a leading candidate to succeed Carla del Ponte of Switzerland as chief prosecutor for the Hague-based tribunal to try war crimes in former Yugoslavia.