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Crisis speeds spy suspect's arrest

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Washington Post Service

WASHINGTON -- The FBI accelerated the arrest of a Defense Intelligence Agency analyst on charges of spying for Cuba out of fear that she would pass along classified information about the U.S. response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, government sources said.

FBI agents arrested Ana Belen Montes, the DIA's senior analyst for Cuba affairs, at her office Sept. 21, abruptly ending more than four months of surveillance.

Prosecutors said they have evidence that Montes was working for the Cuban intelligence service and providing classified information. The surveillance, however, hadn't revealed who her contact was, sources said.

The FBI wanted to catch her in the act of meeting someone or picking up money, but it decided to halt the surveillance and arrest her because of the terrorist crisis, the sources said.

The investigation ended because Cuban intelligence could pass along information provided by Montes to other countries, "particularly some in the Middle East," one government official said.

Government sources said Cuba has been known to share information with Libya, Iran and others that might be sympathetic to Osama bin Laden, the Bush administration's chief suspect in the attacks.

The DIA, which produces military intelligence about foreign countries in support of U.S. planning and operations, couldn't risk keeping Montes on its staff at a time when President Bush had declared war on terrorism, another source said.

"These are the people who prepare military intelligence," the source said. "It's untenable to have someone you know who is passing on information to a hostile country when you're preparing to go to war. . . . They were forced to close the investigation before they would have liked to."

While under surveillance, Montes continued to have access to classified materials, particularly through Intelink, the computer site maintained for the U.S. intelligence community. Montes had access to the highest level of classified material on the site, allowing her to see top-secret data.

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