

April 13, 2013

Hackers Post Witness List in Trial on Ex-Premier's Death

By **MARLISE SIMONS**

PARIS — Hackers broke into a major Lebanese news Web site and plastered the front page with the names of the so-called secret witnesses for the trial in the killing of the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in an apparent bold, new move to intimidate witnesses and derail the trial.

The hacking of the Beirut newspaper last week came on the heels of an earlier publication by another Lebanese newspaper that named 32 witnesses in the trial, which is planned to begin this year. Progress in the case at the United Nations-backed [Special Tribunal for Lebanon](#) has been delayed for years by blocked investigations in Beirut, the killing of a Lebanese investigator, the near-killing of another and the court's bureaucracy.

A spokesman for the tribunal denounced the hacking operation, warning that the authors were endangering the lives of Lebanese citizens. "It is part of the continuing campaign to undermine the tribunal and intimidating all of the witnesses," the spokesman, Marten Youssef, said Friday.

International criminal tribunals have been confronted by threats to witnesses and the disclosure of confidential materials before, and a number of lawyers and journalists have been prosecuted for contempt of court. But until now, international courts have not faced a cyberattack of this scale, according to lawyers in The Hague.

The hackers broke into the Web site of the newspaper Al Mustaqbal and listed personal data for 167 Lebanese men, including their names, passport pictures, their places and years of birth, cities of residence and professions. The text in Arabic and English said that the information about the witnesses was leaked by the tribunal.

Mr. Youssef said that the list published by the hackers was not "an accurate reflection of the official court records," but he gave no further details.

What has unfolded is an opaque story full of twists that is now under investigation by the tribunal, the attorney general of Lebanon and the police in the Netherlands, where the tribunal is based.

It began Tuesday morning when the newspaper [Al Mustaqbal](#) discovered that the front page of its Web site had been taken over by the purported secret witness list, causing much consternation in a small country where many people know one another.

The newspaper was owned by Mr. Hariri and still belongs largely to his family.

The hackers also directed visitors to a Web site called “Journalists for the Truth,” lawyers said.

“We are a group of journalists seeking to unveil corruption in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon,” the Web site said, adding that it aimed to prove “bribery” and “prejudice and non-professionalism” of court officials. It also said its mission was to provide legal support to the witnesses “who face daily temptation or pressure” from tribunal staff.

In what seemed a surreal spin on a Web site that was itself simultaneously publishing the so-called witness list, the site blamed court officials for leaking the confidential information and said that this was an act that “posed a threat to the lives of many witnesses.”

The Journalists for the Truth site revealed no names or news media affiliation, only an e-mail address. The Dutch police said they had traced the Web site to a registry in the Netherlands, but they said its owners were still unknown.

A Lebanese lawyer familiar with the case who spoke on the condition of anonymity said he believed the hackers were supporters of the militant movement Hezbollah, which has long campaigned against the court.

The Hezbollah leadership has consistently denied any connection with the Hariri killing and has said it would not cooperate with the tribunal. The tribunal has charged four Hezbollah members in connection with the bombing of Mr. Hariri’s car as it drove down a seaside boulevard in Beirut in 2005. The location of the four is unknown, and they would be tried in absentia.

Hezbollah officials could not be reached for comment, but the group has previously denied any involvement in the bombing and denounced the tribunal as a tool of the United States and Israel.

In Paris last week, Saad Hariri, the dead prime minister’s son, who has also served as prime minister, called the hacking and the

publication of the possible witnesses in his father's case "a criminal act." He insisted that the tribunal would continue its work and reveal who killed his father and a number of his supporters.

For the tribunal, which faces opposition in Lebanon from Hezbollah and its supporters, the listing of names and photographs is a second major setback this year.

In January, the newspaper Al Akhbar, which is close to Hezbollah, published similar "confidential" lists, revealing pictures and personal details of 32 people it said were witnesses in the case. But the newspaper stopped after it received a warning from Lebanon's attorney general that it was violating judges' orders of confidentiality.

Mr. Youssef, the tribunal spokesman, said the prosecution had prepared a still undisclosed list of 500 potential witnesses. But he declined to say whether the published names were among them. "As a court, we are obviously concerned about the safety of legitimate witnesses," he said, "they are among the most important component of the trial."

Mr. Youssef added that the anonymous "journalists' group" was not credible. "Let them reveal their identity, and we will engage with any critics," he said.

A lawyer in The Hague, familiar with the tribunal's work, called the listing of names an astonishing maneuver. "Without firing a shot or beating up anyone," he said, "they'll manage to scare away all the witnesses."