

U.S. protests seizure of envoy's belongings in Venezuela

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CARACAS - Venezuelan National Guard troops seized the belongings of a U.S. diplomat Thursday en route to the U.S. Embassy in Caracas, an embassy official said.

Brian Penn told the local Globovisión television news channel he believed that National Guardsmen took the container where the diplomat was bringing his household property into the country at or near the international airport about 18 miles south of Caracas earlier Thursday and had not yet returned it to U.S. embassy officials.

"The embassy of the United States has protested this move by the security forces of the Venezuelan government," said Penn, noting that embassy officials had informed the U.S. State Department of the incident.

U.S. embassy officials could not immediately be reached for additional comment.

Mari Pili Hernández, Venezuela's deputy foreign minister for North America, confirmed that National Guard troops took the diplomatic container and were reviewing its contents because it hadn't been inspected by Venezuelan customs officials at the airport as required.

She said Venezuelan authorities suspected that military equipment was being transported in a truck that was going to bring the diplomat's belongings from the airport to the embassy. She did not elaborate.

The incident was likely to raise tensions between Caracas and Washington.

Relations between the two countries have been tense in recent months due to allegations by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez that the United States is conspiring against his government, something Washington denies. U.S. officials, meanwhile, have said they believe Chávez represents a threat to stability in Latin America.