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Defense Department Linguist Pleads Guilty to Transmitting Highly Sensitive Classified National Defense Information to Aid a Foreign Government

Note: Thompson's final plea, statement of facts and indictment are attached.

WASHINGTON – A Minnesota woman pleaded guilty today to one count of delivering national defense information to aid a foreign government.

According to court documents, Mariam Taha Thompson, 63, formerly of Rochester, Minnesota, worked as a contract linguist at an overseas U.S. military facility where she was entrusted with a top secret government security clearance. Thompson pleaded guilty to transmitting highly sensitive classified national defense information to a foreign national who she believed would provide the information to Lebanese Hizballah, a designated foreign terrorist organization.

"Thompson jeopardized the lives of members of the U.S. military as well as other individuals supporting the United States in a combat zone when she passed classified information to a person she knew was connected to Lebanese Hizballah, a foreign terrorist organization which intended to use the information to hurt this country," said Assistant Attorney General John C. Demers for the Justice Department's National Security Division. "To describe this conduct is to condemn it. She will now be held to account for this disgraceful personal and professional betrayal of country and colleagues."

"The United States entrusted the defendant with highly-sensitive classified information regarding one of its most critical tools — human intelligence in an active combat zone," said Acting U.S. Attorney Channing D. Phillips for the District of Columbia. "The defendant's complete betrayal of that trust placed the lives of American men and women on the battlefield, and their allies, in grave danger. Thompson's arrest and prosecution demonstrate that those who intentionally compromise classified information that is entrusted to them will face swift and dire consequences."

"It's astounding that an American working for the U.S. military overseas would abandon her country in favor of terrorists," said Assistant Director Alan E. Kohler Jr. for the FBI's Counterintelligence Division. "The FBI and its partners placed a high priority on this case because the defendant provided classified defense information to a foreign terrorist organization, information that put members of the U.S. military in harm's way."

"Today's plea is an example of the FBI's work and commitment to protecting the United States and our national defense information," said Assistant Director in Charge Steven M. D'Antuono for the FBI Washington Field Office. "Holding a top secret government security clearance bears a responsibility and commitment to our nation, and betrayal of that trust will not be tolerated. The FBI is charged with safeguarding our nation's information and will work diligently, along with our partners, to protect intelligence and national security information and relentlessly pursue those who choose to betray their country."

During today's plea hearing, Thompson admitted that, beginning in 2017, she started communicating with her unindicted co-conspirator using a video-chat feature on a secure text and voice messaging application. Over time, Thompson developed a romantic interest in her co-conspirator. Thompson learned that the unindicted co-conspirator had a family member who was in the Lebanese Ministry of the Interior, and that the unindicted co-conspirator claimed to have received a ring from Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Lebanese Hizballah.

In December 2019, while Thompson was assigned to a special operations task force facility in Iraq, the United States launched a series of airstrikes in Iraq targeting Kata'ib Hizballah, an Iranian-backed foreign terrorist organization. These airstrikes culminated in a Jan. 3, 2020, strike that resulted in the death of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force commander Qasem Suleimani, as well as the founder of Kata'ib Hizballah, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Following Suleimani's death, the unindicted co-conspirator started asking Thompson to provide "them" with information about the human assets who had helped the United States to target Suleimani. Thompson admitted that she understood "them" to be Lebanese Hizballah, including an unnamed high-ranking military commander.

After receiving this request for information in early January 2020, Thompson began accessing dozens of files concerning human intelligence sources, including true names, personal identification data, background information and photographs of the human assets, as well as operational cables detailing information the assets provided to the U.S. government. Thompson used several techniques to pass this information on to the unindicted co-conspirator, who told her that his contacts were pleased with the information, and that the Lebanese Hizballah military commander wanted to meet Thompson when she came to Lebanon.

When she was arrested by the FBI on Feb. 27, 2020, Thompson had used her access to classified national defense information to provide her co-conspirator with the identities of at least eight clandestine human assets; at least 10 U.S. targets; and multiple tactics, techniques and procedures. Thompson intended and had reason to believe that this classified national defense information would be used to the injury of the United States and to the advantage of Lebanese Hizballah.

Thompson faces a maximum sentence of up to life imprisonment. The maximum statutory sentence is prescribed by Congress and is provided here for informational purposes only. The sentencing of a defendant will be determined by the court based on the advisory Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Today's guilty plea was the result of the significant cooperation between law enforcement, the Department of Defense and the intelligence community in the successful resolution of this investigation led by the FBI Washington Field Office.

National Security Division Trial Attorneys Jennifer Kennedy Gellie of the Counterintelligence and Export Control Section and Jennifer Levy of the Counterterrorism Section, and Special Assistant U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia John Cummings are prosecuting the case.

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