

SULAIMANIYAH, Iraq – The U.S. State Department said Friday it was investigating reports that three American tourists have been detained by Iranians while hiking near Iran's border with the self-ruled Kurdish region in northern Iraq.

Two Kurdish officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to release the information, said the Americans apparently were arrested after entering Iranian territory without permission.

U.S. helicopters were buzzing overhead and many U.S. Humvees had moved into the Kurdish city of Halabja to search for the Americans, said a Kurdish border force official.

According to a security official, a fourth American who stayed behind at a hotel because he was sick said the missing Americans were tourists hiking near Halabja and the border town of Ahmed Awaa.

According to this account, the four had traveled to Turkey, then entered the Kurdish region Tuesday through the Ibrahim Al-Khalil border point in Zakho, the official said. They visited the Kurdish cities of Irbil and Sulaimaniyah on Wednesday. The next day, three of them took a taxi to Ahmed Awaa where they told their companion that they planned to stay at a nearby resort, the official said.

The three contacted their companion on Friday and told him "they had mistakenly entered Iranian territory and that troops surrounded them," the official said, adding "that was the last contact with them."

The mountainous border area is a popular hiking destination and well-known for its thick growth of pistachio trees.

The border force official said Iranian authorities apparently arrested the three Americans because they had entered the neighboring country without permission.

State Department spokesman Robert Wood said the U.S. Embassy "is aware of the report and is investigating. We are using all available means to determine the facts in this case."

Iranian officials made no immediate comment.

The self-ruled Kurdish region has been relatively free of the violence that plagues the rest of Iraq. Foreigners often feel freer to move around without security guards in the area.

Halabja, 150 miles (240 kilometers) northeast of Baghdad, was the site of a chemical weapons attack ordered by Saddam Hussein in 1988 as part of a scorched-earth campaign to crush a Kurdish rebellion. An estimated 5,600 were killed in the nerve and mustard gas attacks — the vast majority Kurds — and many still suffer the aftereffects.