

Images surface of Saudis allegedly sent to target writer

ISTANBUL: Turkish media close to the president published images Wednesday of what it described as a 15-member “assassination squad” allegedly sent to target Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and of a black van later traveling from the Saudi consulate, where he went missing, to the consul’s home.

The release of the photographs and video raises pressure on Saudi Arabia a week after Khashoggi disappeared during a visit to the consulate. Turkish officials fear that the team killed the writer, who was critical of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The kingdom has called the allegations “baseless,” but has not provided any evidence that Khashoggi left the consulate and did not respond to requests for comment Wednesday. News channel 24 aired the video, suggesting that Khashoggi was inside of the black Mercedes Vito, which resembled one parked outside of the consulate when the writer walked in on Oct. 2. The channel said the van then drove some 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) to the consul’s home, where it parked inside a garage.

The Sabah newspaper, which is similarly close to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, published images of what it referred to as the “assassination squad” apparently taken at passport control. It said they checked into two hotels in Istanbul on Oct. 2 and left later that day.

Khashoggi had written a series of columns for the Washington Post that were critical of Saudi Arabia’s assertive Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has led a widely publicized drive to reform the Sunni monarchy but has also presided over

the arrests of activists and businessmen.

On Wednesday, the Post published a column by Khashoggi's fiancée, Hatice Cengiz. She acknowledged the writer first visited the consulate on Sept. 28 "despite being somewhat concerned that he could be in danger." He later returned Oct. 2 after being promised needed paperwork so the two could be married.

A surveillance video image surfaced Tuesday showing Khashoggi walking into the consulate in Istanbul's upscale 4th Levent neighborhood. No evidence of him leaving the consulate has been made public, but Turkish officials also have yet to provide evidence he was kidnapped or killed.

"At this time, I implore President Trump and first lady Melania Trump to help shed light on Jamal's disappearance," Cengiz wrote. "I also urge Saudi Arabia, especially King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, to show the same level of sensitivity and release CCTV footage from the consulate."

She added: "Although this incident could potentially fuel a political crisis between the two nations, let us not lose sight of the human aspect of what happened." Khashoggi had sought to become a U.S. citizen after living in self-imposed exile since last year, fearing repercussions for his criticism of the prince, Cengiz wrote.

Trump, who took his first overseas trip as U.S. president to the kingdom and whose son-in-law Jared Kushner has close ties to Prince Mohammed, said Tuesday he had not yet talked to the Saudis about Khashoggi, "but I will be at some point," without elaborating.

Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said Tuesday that Saudi authorities have notified Ankara that they were "open to cooperation" and would allow the consulate building to be searched. It's unclear when such a search would take

place.

Embassies and consulates under the Vienna Convention are technically foreign soil and must be protected by host nations. Saudi Arabia may have agreed to the search in order to reassure its Western allies and the international community.

Fraser reported from Ankara, Turkey, and Gambrell reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates.