

Obama wants rigorous inquiry in prostitution scandal

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CARTAGENA (Colombia), April 16 — US President Barack Obama said yesterday the Secret Service would fully investigate reports that agents assigned to protect him in Colombia were caught with prostitutes, saying he would be angry if the allegations proved true.

Obama, who spent three days in the South American country attending the Summit of the Americas, said he expected the agents and military personnel in his entourage to behave with "the utmost dignity and probity" while overseas.

"Obviously what's been reported doesn't match up with those standards," he told a news conference in Cartagena, a Caribbean coastal city known for its beachfront and night life.

"If it turns out that some of the allegations that have been made in the press are confirmed, then of course I'll be angry."

The scandal embarrassed the US government and overshadowed the summit hosted by its ally Colombia.

It also marred the previously sparkling reputation of the Secret Service, whose agents guard US presidents and their families as well as top government officials and diplomatic missions in Washington.

A senior US congressman said the scandal also raised the possibility that bad behavior has gone unnoticed before and he called on investigators to determine if there had been past transgressions.

Places on leave

The Secret Service put 11 agents on administrative leave and the US military grounded five servicemen as a result of the reported incident that occurred before the president arrived.

A local police source said the Americans brought a number of prostitutes back to their beachfront hotel near where Obama was due to stay, and that at least one member of the security team flashed his badge and demanded that hotel staff allow him to remain with a woman.

A US source familiar with the situation said it appeared some of the agents had gone to a bar and brought back various friendly women who turned out to be asking for money when they got back to the hotel rooms.

Prostitution is legal in "tolerance zones" in Colombia and is also widely practiced outside those areas without sanction.

Representative Darrell Issa, the Republican chairman of a House of Representatives oversight panel, told CBS' "Face the Nation" programme yesterday that Secret Service

agents could be compromised by the type of behavior alleged.

"In this particular case, the president may not have been in danger but that's to beg the whole question of ... what happens if somebody, six months ago, six years ago, became the victim of their own misconduct and is now being blackmailed?" he said.

"It's not about whether the president was in danger this time. It's whether or not you need to make changes so the American people can have confidence" in the agency, Issa said.

Issa, a frequent critic of the Obama administration, said he has not decided whether the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee should hold hearings on the scandal.

But he said the Secret Service should look into the wider implications of what occurred.

"The investigation will not be about the 11 to 20 or more involved, it will be about how did this happen and how often has this happened before," Issa told CBS. "Things like this don't happen once if they didn't happen before."

Obama said he would wait until the Secret Service completed its inquiry to pass final judgment.

"I expect that investigation to be thorough and I expect it to be rigorous," he said. — Reuters

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