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Los Angeles Times



Old mystery: Why did Gardena help get police vests to Cambodia?



When the U.S. Customs Service launched an investigation into the sale of the bulletproof vests in 2002, federal agents were told that the transactions were coordinated by Paul Tanaka, who is both the sheriff's second-in-command and the mayor of Gardena. Tanaka declined to comment for this report. (Francine Orr, Los Angeles Times)

By ROBERT FATURECHI AND JACK LEONARD, LOS ANGELES TIMES

FEB. 10, 2013 12 AM PT



A decade ago, Gardena Police Capt. Tom Monson was surprised to discover that a \$5,190 check had been mailed to his station from the Honorary Consulate of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

Monson was unable to figure out what business the small police agency had with the government of Cambodia.

Shortly afterward, Monson was presented with another vexing puzzle. His police department had recently purchased 173 bulletproof vests from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department — a lot, considering that the department had fewer than 100 officers.

Then he noticed the price of those vests: \$5,190. The same amount the Kingdom of Cambodia had paid to the department.

So began a mystery about ballistic vests, international police connections and local politics that still endures 10 years later.

A Times investigation has found that top sheriff's officials used the City of Gardena to funnel hundreds of bulletproof vests to Cambodian police.

Sheriff's media representatives gave The Times differing accounts about the transaction, initially denying any sheriff's officials were involved in sending the vests to Cambodia, then offering explanations contradicted by records and interviews. The officials involved in the transaction refused to discuss it.

Prompted by The Times' inquiry, Sheriff Lee Baca recently asked the county auditor-controller's office to examine the sale, and a sheriff's spokesman called that review "a complete vindication" that proved the transactions were "above board." But Auditor-Controller Wendy Watanabe said in an interview she was only told that the vests were sold to Gardena, not that Gardena was a go-between to get them to Cambodia.

"The word Cambodia didn't even come up in the conversation," she said.

It is not unusual for U.S. law enforcement agencies to donate used or obsolete equipment to other departments, including foreign ones. But in this case, the vests were sent through an intermediary and not declared to customs officials, as required by federal law. Instead, they were stuffed inside one of a number of patrol cars that the Sheriff's Department was shipping directly to Cambodia, avoiding the rigorous vetting process the U.S. government requires to prevent body armor from getting into the wrong hands abroad.

The U.S. Customs Service launched an investigation into the sale of the vests in 2002, and federal agents were told that the transactions were coordinated by Paul Tanaka, who is both the sheriff's second-in-command and the mayor of Gardena. Other members of the City Council were kept in the dark about the purchase — and the vests were never claimed by the city. They were picked up from the sheriff's warehouse, signed for by a sheriff's reserve, then packed into a patrol car headed for the Southeast Asian country.

The existence of the federal probe was never made public until now. Customs agents decided not to seek criminal charges, concluding there wasn't enough evidence to show that anyone involved in the transactions knew the relevant export laws.

David Johnson, a Washington, D.C., export controls attorney who reviewed the records for The Times, called that a “curious rationale,” saying authorities don’t have to prove knowledge of the law to press charges. “On its face, it seems like someone was going to great lengths to obfuscate the actual transaction,” he said.

After closing the case, federal authorities referred the matter to sheriff’s investigators. But a sheriff’s spokesman said the department did not conduct its own investigation.

The spokesman, Steve Whitmore, said officials did nothing wrong and sent the vests through Gardena because they were under the mistaken impression that county rules prevented them from dealing directly with foreign nations. He could not explain why that same misunderstanding did not apply to the patrol cars, which officials did send directly to the Cambodians as part of the same shipment.

Tanaka declined to comment for this story. Several of the Gardena council members serving at the time said they never knew about the vests. “I’m very troubled by it,” former Councilman Steven Bradford said in an interview.

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City records showed that Gardena had made two purchases from the Sheriff’s Department, the first in May for 173 unused ballistic vests and the second a month later for 300 used vests at a cost of \$3,000. Monson and a colleague notified federal authorities.

Records obtained by The Times under the Freedom of Information Act detail the customs probe. Though the names of those interviewed were redacted, it is clear that investigators approached City Manager Mitchell Lansdell.

Lansdell, the records indicate, explained that the purchase was ordered by a councilman who also worked for the Sheriff's Department — a profile that fits only Tanaka. That councilman, the city manager said, called him at home and told him to buy vests that were about to be put up for sale by the Sheriff's Department.

He “probably could not bid on the ballistic vests himself because of a conflict of interest,” Lansdell told the agents. (Whitmore said that Tanaka played only a minor role and that it was former Undersheriff Larry Waldie who made the phone call to Lansdell. Waldie told The Times he had no recollection of making the call but declined to say if he was involved.)

Lansdell told agents he knew the vests were never intended for the city's police. In the purchase documents, he signed under the penalty of perjury that “this bid is genuine and not ... sham or collusive, or made in the interest ... of any person, firm or corporation not ... named.”

In a statement emailed to The Times, Lansdell said that the city sold the vests “to grateful law enforcement officials in Cambodia” and that the sales were reviewed by federal authorities, who took no action as a result.

Federal agents also interviewed a sheriff's reserve official who runs a freight forwarding company — a profile that fits sheriff's reserve commander Chester Chong.

In a brief phone interview, Chong told The Times he was just following orders from his department in handling the vests: “I'm just the middleman ... I'm not the big cat. I'm not the sheriff.” He referred further questions to the Sheriff's Department. The records say that the person who picked up the vests from the Sheriff's Department was told “to sign the receiving paperwork as ‘City of Gardena’” even though he was not an employee of the city.

As the investigation unfolded, customs agents learned that Cambodian national police officials had requested cars and vests during an April 2002 meeting with sheriff's officials and FBI representatives.

Cambodian authorities told customs that the 300 used vests were shipped in August 2002. The vests were stuffed inside one of 20 black-and-white patrol cars that the Sheriff's Department was giving directly to the Cambodian police. A fax was sent from the sheriff's International Liaison Unit to the Cambodian national police days after the cars were shipped: "Please note, 300 pcs of complimentary Bullet Proved Vests was forwarded to you as our gifts."

The records say the other 173 vests arrived at the Cambodian consulate in Los Angeles, but it is unclear what happened to them. The Cambodian embassy in Washington, D.C., did not return calls from The Times for comment.

Monson said that after he reported the sales to federal authorities, his relationship with Tanaka and Lansdell became chilly. He eventually left to become police chief in Buena Park, before retiring. He said he still wonders why officials went to such lengths to get ballistic vests to Cambodia.

"The motive for doing this has got to be the big question here," he said. "It just doesn't smell right."

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As senior editor of investigations, Jack Leonard oversees the work of a team of investigative reporters in the Los Angeles Times' Metro section and coordinates investigative stories in other departments as well as investigative partnerships with other organizations. As a reporter, he was part of the team that exposed fraud and abuse in California's conservatorship system, a series that won several national awards. He went on to investigate how early releases from L.A.'s jail system perverts justice and fosters more crime on the street. Later, he worked on a sweeping expose of abuse and corruption in the L.A. County Sheriff's Department.

Los Angeles Times

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