

Anomalous Health Incidents: The Havana Syndrome

THE ISSUE

To date, as many as 200 Americans have reported signs of Havana syndrome, a series of debilitating symptoms that first affected U.S. intelligence officers and State Department staff stationed in Havana, Cuba, in late 2016. The first reported case involved an American officer in Havana. The officer went to the U.S. embassy's health office to report strange sound sensations and pressure sensations followed by intense headaches and dizziness. Several other officers in Cuba reported similar mysterious sensations while at their homes throughout early 2017. Cases have since been reported in roughly a dozen other countries, including the United States.

CIA Director William Burns said recently: “There are probably a couple of hundred incidents across the U.S. government and across the globe. Of those couple of hundred, there’s probably about 100 in which my colleagues, my officers and family members have been affected.” Reportedly, of the other incidents, approximately 60 cases involve Department of Defense officials or their relatives, around 50 cases involve State Department personnel or their relatives, and at least two cases involve White House staff.

SYMPTOMS AND NOTABLE CASES: TIMELINE

Symptoms have included: head pressure, migraines, memory loss and trouble concentrating, ear ringing/tinnitus, dizziness, fatigue, nausea, anxiety, vision problems, balance issues, hearing loss, sleeplessness, and other neurological symptoms.

Multiple cases affecting American and Canadian officials occurred in areas outside Havana. Additional possible cases have occurred in China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Uzbekistan, Colombia, Taiwan, Poland, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and Austria, with possible U.S. cases in Miami and two in Washington, DC, involving former Trump Administration National Security Council (NSC) staff. Most recently, there have been reports of nearly two dozen U.S. officials in Vienna, Austria, who have reported Havana syndrome symptoms. Vienna is notable as several international bodies are headquartered in the Austrian capital, including the International Atomic Energy Agency. Vienna is also the current site of negotiations on the Iran deal.

There have been possible earlier cases dating back to 1996 involving NSA officers, but it is unclear if they are linked to the more recent incidents.

THEORIZED WEAPON

A 2020 report by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (commissioned by the State Department) assessed that many of the symptoms described by Havana syndrome victims are consistent with the effects of “directed, pulse radio frequency energy.” A declassified NSA statement from 2014 said, in regards to the 1996 incident referenced above, that a hostile country to which the officers were located had an association “with a high powered microwave system weapon that may have the ability to weaken, intimidate, or kill an enemy, over time, and without leaving

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evidence.” Additionally, the intelligence information “indicated that this weapon is designed to bathe a target’s living quarters in microwaves, causing numerous physical effects, including a damaged nervous system.”

It is an open question whether the suspected directed-energy devices are being used deliberately as a weapon, or are an inadvertent side effect of a signals intelligence collection system. Investigators reportedly cannot definitively say if the directed-energy attacks have been caused by a specific weapon, but have theorized that it would be “primarily transported by vehicle” and that some could be “small enough to fit into a large backpack, and an individual can be targeted from 500 to 1,000 yards away.”

POTENTIAL PERPETRATORS

The U.S. Intelligence Community thus far has not reached a consensus or made any formal attributions for the possible directed-energy incidents. There has been unverified reporting in recent months about the investigation of possible involvement by Russia’s intelligence directorate, the GRU. Russia’s interest in developing microwave weaponry dates to the Soviet Union. The National Academies’ 2020 report noted:

[M]any of the distinctive and acute signs, symptoms, and observations reported by DOS [Department of State] employees are consistent with the effects of directed, pulsed radio frequency (RF) energy. Studies published in the open literature more than a half century ago and over the subsequent decades by Western and Soviet sources provide circumstantial support for this possible mechanism.

Recent reporting from closed-door briefings on Capitol Hill have claimed that the origin of the technology required in such attacks is “more likely than not in Russia,” but that China could also be a culprit. CIA Director Burns, when asked specifically if Russia is behind the incidents, stated: “Could be, but I honestly cannot—I don’t

want to suggest until we can draw some more definitive conclusions who it might be. But there are a number of possibilities.”

U.S. RESPONSE SO FAR

The State Department, the CIA, and the Defense Department each have a task force looking into the Havana syndrome. In addition, to assist in detecting incidents, the State Department “has established a team of medical experts to respond to reports of possible health incidents, and offered baseline medical screenings to diplomats in case they later report an incident.” It was recently reported that CIA Director Burns put a veteran of the agency’s hunt for Osama bin Laden in charge of the CIA’s task force.

Last year, under the leadership of then-Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe and National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) Director Bill Evanina, agencies were required to come up with a “more standardized set of criteria,” and the NCSC was designated as the clearinghouse to compile and collect data on government-wide cases.

Reportedly, the U.S. has started a program to develop countermeasures to these directed-energy attacks. CIA Director Burns has tripled the number of full-time medical personnel at the CIA who are looking into these issues. Additionally, Burns has said that he has a strong team focused on the questions of “What?” and “Who?”

Additionally, it has been reported that the NSC is establishing two expert panels to study the issue. The panels will be composed of experts from both “inside and outside of government” and will focus on determining the cause of the Havana syndrome as well as possible treatment methods. The State Department has also directed those posted overseas to report any symptoms consistent with directed-energy attacks to the Bureau of Medical Services for a possible referral to the National Institutes of Health.

Legislators on Capitol Hill have also been investigating the issue, looking at codified

changes and resources to address the origins of the incidents, the CIA's initial response, and workforce health claims and treatments, as well as codifying a recently appointed position, the Anomalous Health Incidents Interagency Coordinator, within the NSC to coordinate government-wide action on the investigation of the origins and response to the incidents. The Senate Intelligence Committee's recently approved Intelligence Authorization Act gives those affected access to Walter Reed Medical Center, which has unique specialties for brain injuries. The Senate version of the fiscal year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act authorizes an additional \$30 million for the Defense Health Program to treat victims.