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U.S. Criticized Over Treatment Of Latin Source

U.S. authorities are desperately seeking information about terrorist groups that might kill or kidnap Americans overseas.

The State Department got invaluable information from a Guatemalan refugee and then, believe it or not, handed him over to the Guatemalan government for prosecution.

The informer, Jorge Zimeri, had been part of an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the repressive Guatemalan government. He fled to the United States after miraculously surviving an assassination attempt that left him with 13 bullet wounds.

Zimeri knows who's who in the Guatemalan underground.

He told the State Department which groups have been murdering American diplomats and advisers in Guatemala.

A State Department intelligence officer, Belle Johnstone, flew to El Salvador and Guatemala and corroborated Zimeri's information.

Her report was so sensitive it will be kept classified until the year 2005.

Meanwhile, the Guatemalan government issued a warrant for Zimeri's arrest on a trumped-up murder charge and demanded that he be extradited. In a secret memorandum to superiors, Johnstone wrote:

"I have extensively researched this case and have strong doubts as to the credibility of the charge. Recent information indicates the possibility that Zimeri was not even in Guatemala at the time of the alleged murder. . . . There is supportive reason [to believe] that the accusations could have been made for political reasons."

In spite of this warning and Zimeri's service to the United States, the State Department deported him last August to Guatemala, where he was put in prison to await trial. In May, he was acquitted of the murder charge, but he has gone into hiding in fear for his life.

The State Department has refused to issue him a visa to return to the United States. Meanwhile, he has never seen his infant daughter, who lives with his wife in Miami.

Zimeri's experience should discourage other informers from cooperating with the State Department to combat the terrorist threat. Certainly this is the opinion of a Washington, D.C., homicide detective, Jack Chaillet, who brought Zimeri to the State Department.

"He turned out to be a gold mine of information," Chaillet told my

associate Indy Badhwar. "I'm really upset with the way the State Department has treated Zimeri. First, he should never have been deported, and he should now be allowed back. He might get killed over there."

Chaillet, who is now retired, added: "Zimeri was our source, a police department source. It was because he trusted us that he agreed to talk to the State Department. If this is the way the State Department treats informants, then the local cops are going to tell those guys to shove it when they ask for cooperation on intelligence matters."

In Miami, where she lives with her 3-month-old daughter, Norma Zimeri said: "I feel because he helped the government here his life is in danger. I cannot stay here alone any longer. I will have to go to El Salvador where Jorge can come to see his daughter."

Footnote: There is one minor complication. With 13 bullet wounds to remind Zimeri that he's on someone's hit list, he purchased two handguns in Miami without disclosing his alien status. This is a law violation, and he served 11 months in jail.

A State Department consular official, meanwhile, said no final decision has been made on Zimeri's visa application. Johnstone would not comment.