

Beat: Local

Police hint at crime in disappearance of Dutch girls in Panama

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USPA News - Two young women from the Netherlands who disappeared earlier this month during a trip to Panama are unlikely to have gotten lost, Dutch police said on Tuesday, raising the possibility that the women may be the victims of a crime. Kris Kremers, 21, and Lisanne Froon, 22, disappeared on the afternoon of April 1 during or shortly after a brief hike near the small town of Boquete, located in Panama's western province of Chiriquí, approximately 60 kilometers (37 miles) from the border with Costa Rica.

It is a mountainous area popular with tourists and considered to be safe. The disappearance quickly led to a massive search effort in the mountainous area, involving search and rescue personnel, helicopters, search dogs, and volunteers from the local community. But no trace of the women was found, leading authorities to end the search effort on April 14 as a police investigation intensified. Discussing the case on Tuesday evening, Dutch police spokesman Bernhard Jens said it appeared unlikely that the women had gotten lost, raising the possibility that the women may be the victims of a crime. "The Panamanian police have really thoroughly searched the area. So it does not seem obvious to us that they are lost," he said. The women had left for Panama on March 15 and were due to return home next week. "The purpose of the trip of Lisanne and Kris was to volunteer in Panama over the course of six weeks," said Peter Froon, Lisanne's father, during an interview broadcast on Dutch television on Tuesday night. He said the women first traveled to Bocas del Toro to vacation and to learn Spanish for two weeks before spending the remainder of their time in Boquete to volunteer at a school. When the women arrived in Boquete on March 29, however, they were told there had been a problem and that they would not be able to volunteer until the following week at a different school nearby. "So they had a week to fill, basically. And they started doing that on Monday (March 31) and Tuesday (April 1)," said Hans Kremers, Kris' father. In one of their last communications with their parents back home in the Netherlands, the women said on March 31 that they were having a good time and were planning to go for a hike the next day. The parents of Lisanne next received a phone call on Wednesday, April 2, after the women did not stay at their host family's house overnight and both had failed to show up for a class. According to investigators, on the morning of April 1, the women had visited the school where they initially expected to volunteer. "There they went on the internet and looked at a route of the Pianista Path which they were possibly going to walk," Jens said, adding that the women left the school at around 11 a.m. "Around 1 p.m. they were then seen near another school, where they were expecting to actually volunteer. Then they walked towards the [town's] center," the police spokesman said. He said the last confirmed sighting of the women was reported by a pension holder who said he had seen them several times. Police say the women asked the pension holder for the way to the Pianista Path at about 1:30 p.m., but the man instead offered them another route that provides a view across a nature area. The women returned about an hour later, apparently after taking the route offered by the man. "They had enough. It was between about 2:30 p.m. and 3 p.m. They were tired and said they wanted to return," Jens said. The pension holder told investigators that the women had also asked for his help in getting back to the town and inquired whether they should take a taxi or a bus. "He advised them to take a taxi," Jens explained. "Then he saw them standing on the side of the road for a while but unfortunately he was unable to say whether they walked to the town or went back to the mountain." Several witnesses told investigators they may have seen the women between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. at or near Pianista Path, but those sightings have not been confirmed. "It seems unlikely to us that they started the hike on Pianista Path that late and, for example, were overtaken by the darkness," Jens said, describing the women as responsible and well-prepared. Police have said "all scenarios" were still being considered but are appealing for tourists who may have seen the women to come forward. Two Dutch men who spent time with the women during their stay in Boquete on March 31, a day before the disappearance, were previously questioned by Dutch police. "After 3 weeks there has been no trace of our daughters and we live daily between hope and fear," the women's parents said in a joint statement on Tuesday. "These are difficult times for us as you can understand. The search for Kris and Lisanne continues unabated and we hope that you will continue sending your tips and suggestions. ... We continue to hope for a safe return of Lisanne and Kris." Tourism in Panama has continued to grow in recent years, with tourism now accounting for nearly one-tenth of gross domestic product (GDP). Only 345,000 international tourists visited Panama in 1995 but that number surpassed 1 million in 2007 and reached 1.6 million in 2012, according to World Bank figures. Panama is considered to remain relatively safe when compared to other countries in Central America, with the country's murder rate dropping from more than 800 in 2009 to 655 in 2012 after increased police efforts to combat violent crime. But while various crime rates have declined, the number of rapes has risen sharply from 809 reported rapes in 2009 to 1,100 rapes in 2012.

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