

Beat: Health

U.S. man accused of keeping German woman captive

-, 11.06.2014, 01:19 Time

USPA News - A North Carolina man has been arrested on suspicion he held captive a German woman who he had met through a dating website, with investigators looking into alleged statements that he killed other foreign women in the past, local police said on Tuesday. The investigation began at around 8 a.m. local time on Monday when police in the town of Zebulon, located in Wake County, received a call from a man in Germany who said his estranged wife had contacted him through email and claimed she was being held against her will by a man in Zebulon.

Detectives following up on the tip were led to a local warehouse rented by 45-year-old Robert E. Whiteside. "Detectives went to the site and saw there appeared to be an active work site but there was no way to get into the building," said Zebulon Police Chief Timothy Hayworth. He said police then made contact with Whiteside, who agreed to meet officers and showed up about an hour later with the victim in his vehicle. After detectives separated the woman from Whiteside, she told detectives that she had been held against her will since arriving in the United States on June 4 and was stripped of her abilities to leave. "The victim related to detectives that she has been held against her will, physically and sexually assaulted, and stripped of her finances," the police chief said. Whiteside was charged with human trafficking and assault by strangulation, but additional charges are expected as the investigation continues. "We do have information that she was strangled and sexually assaulted. That is part of the initial charge of human trafficking, as in holding a person in involuntary servitude for sexual gratification, and so there could be other charges of that nature coming out," Hayworth said. The victim in the case was identified as a 34-year-old woman who was born in Russia but is currently a German citizen and estranged from her husband in Germany. She does not speak English fluently. "She was very excited to see the police. Very excited to be away from our suspect in this case, and she's very cooperative," Hayworth said. Whiteside is known to have advertised on a number of dating websites, where he met the victim, and may even have advertised in newspapers in other countries. "I think she probably came here willingly, but, you know, with the idea of, she's coming to America, and met this nice guy on the internet, and when she got here things were not as rosy as depicted online," the police chief explained. Hayworth said the victim had sent an email to her estranged husband during her captivity to ask for money, which aroused suspicion and prompted him to contact police in Zebulon. "Her email was very short but she is asking for money. She's kind of hinting at the fact that she doesn't have any money, she's not able to leave. It was enough to alert the person in Germany to feel that she was in danger," he said. It was not immediately clear how the woman, whose name has not been released, had been held captive since arriving in the U.S. on June 4, but Hayworth said investigators believe Whiteside purposely held the woman "within arm's reach" at all time to prevent her from escaping. "We think that was part of the way he operated," he said. During the search of the warehouse, investigators discovered a hidden bedroom behind a wall, where they believe the woman was held captive at times, though it appears the room could not be locked from the outside. "The doorway ... it appeared to be part of a wall until you pressed on it, and then it opened into a bedroom," said Lt. Scott Finch. Whiteside both lived and ran a business from the property, which is located in a remote area that is not visible from the roadway. "There is a business operating next to it that is a plastics company, but you wouldn't be able to hear anything in this building, you wouldn't see anything in this building, unless you were inside the building," Hayworth explained. "You could stand in the parking lot and not see anything suspicious about this building." Investigators were also looking into statements by Whiteside to the victim that he had killed other foreign women in the past. "We think that was possibly just a scare tactic, but we obviously are exploring that and yesterday we called out a cadaver dog to search the property. We hope not to have any other victims, and especially not any deceased victims," Hayworth said. But although investigators had not yet found any evidence to support suggestions that Whiteside held other women in the past, Hayworth said the suspect is known to have dated other foreign women and police were attempting to contact them. Whiteside is also known to have traveled widely himself, including to countries such as Ukraine, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and Uzbekistan. Other addresses connected to Whiteside were also being searched by officers, including a location in Virginia. "We've sent deputies in different cities and different counties to the addresses to see if, you know, if there's anybody there, if there's any evidence there, if there's anything suspicious," said Hayworth. Whiteside initially cooperated with investigators but stopped answering questions after being charged. The woman was said to be in good health and was taken to a safe house for protection. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was also working to get her an extended stay in the United States to allow her to assist with the criminal case.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-2306/us-man-accused-of-keeping-german-woman-captive.html>

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