

Name: Alert ID: TMML202403202912 WASHINGTON (AP) — An American security contractor is accusing two top-ranking Congolese officials of ordering his detention and torture, declaring in a lawsuit that they demanded he confess falsely to being part of a plot to overthrow the country's government. Darryl Lewis, an Air Force veteran, said in an Associated Press interview this week that he was illegally held in Congo's capital, Kinshasa, for nearly six weeks and interrogated for as much as 16 hours a day by members of Congo's national intelligence agency. Congo's intelligence chief, Kalev Mutond, and Congolese Justice Minister Alexis Thambwe Mwamba, "acted in concert" to have him detained, tortured and "threatened with indefinite imprisonment on false charges," according to the lawsuit, filed July 29 in federal court in Washington. "I feared for my life from the day they captured me," Lewis, 48, said. He said he never confessed. Congo's ambassador, Francois Balumuene, said in a statement Thursday that Lewis was detained because he did not have the proper work permit. He denied Lewis had been mistreated and called his lawsuit "unsubstantiated allegations." Law enforcement authorities in Congo released Lewis on June 8 after "extensive diplomatic efforts and negotiations," the lawsuit said. Lewis is seeking at least \$4.5 million in compensatory and punitive damages. The lawsuit comes amid mounting tensions ahead of November presidential elections in Congo. Opposition leaders claim that President Joseph Kabila wants to delay the vote so he can stay in power past his mandate that expires at the end of the year. The country's constitution bars Kabila from running for a third term. Congo's relations with Washington have frayed over the last year due to repeated reports that Kabila's government has cracked down on political foes and activists. The U.S. Treasury Department in June sanctioned a top Congolese police official who activists say is linked to dozens of deaths. The department's statement announcing the sanctions against Celestin Kanyama noted a "pattern of repression" by Kabila's government. Lewis had been working as an unarmed security adviser for Moise Katumbi, Congo's leading opposition candidate for president. Katumbi, one of Kabila's harshest critics, has been charged separately by authorities in Congo with hiring mercenaries. Katumbi and his supporters have denied the allegation and say the move is aimed at derailing his bid for the presidency. In the lawsuit, Mwamba is described as being convinced that Lewis and hundreds of other U.S. citizens had infiltrated Congo since last October to help Katumbi overthrow the government and assassinate Kabila. Lewis' military background made him especially suspect. At a May 4 press conference, Mwamba displayed as evidence a photo of Lewis holding a large machine gun. Lewis said the photo was taken in 2009 when he was working as a contractor in Kosovo. Congolese authorities must have pulled it from his LinkedIn account, he said. The photo has since been replaced with another of Lewis. Mwamba declined to comment on the specifics of Lewis' lawsuit. "A Congolese who would be found to have acted in the U.S. as Lewis did in the (Congo) surely would have to explain himself before the FBI and other authorities," he said. The lawsuit said Lewis and three colleagues were "stopped and surrounded" by Congolese riot police on April 24 as they were driving near a political rally that Katumbi had attended in the city of Lubumbashi. They were unarmed and breaking no laws, according to Lewis. He was the only American in the group. Soon, several members of Congo's intelligence agency, who were not named in the suit, arrived. They handcuffed and physically assaulted Lewis and his colleagues. At one point, a car door was slammed into his elbow, the lawsuit said. Lewis said they were taken to a "filthy, unsanitary" jail in Lubumbashi and put in separate cells. He was assaulted and abused, according to the lawsuit. His bound hands were pulled up behind his back, creating painful pressure on his shoulder joints. During the night, Lewis could hear his captors "brutally beat" and interrogate one of his colleagues. "You're next," Lewis said he was warned. The next day Lewis was transported to the intelligence agency's headquarters in Kinshasa. Over the next six weeks, he was questioned for long periods and deprived of sleep, according to the lawsuit. His captors gave him just one small meal a day. Lewis said his captors also began a series of "mind games," such as using information about his ailing mother, to wear him down and secure a confession. Lewis was not charged with a crime before he was released.