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Viet Aides Use Blank Check, Get \$250,000

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Two officials of the South Vietnamese embassy here stole \$250,000 by cashing an embassy check that they fraudulently wrote for themselves, an FBI spokesman said yesterday.

The spokesman, responding to an inquiry, said the check was cashed April 18 at Madison National Bank at 1730 M. St. NW.

A reliable source said the bank issued the money to the officials mostly in \$20 bills, which the Vietnamese placed in an attache case.

The FBI spokesman said the two embassy officials, whom he would not name, have since disappeared.

He said they had worked for the embassy's overseas procurement office.

The procurement office, a red-carpeted suite on the fifth floor above the bank, buys agricultural products and supplies from the United States for shipment to Vietnam.

Although much of the food is purchased with U.S. government funds under various aid programs, officials of the Agriculture and State departments said yesterday that the missing money could not have come from the U.S. government.

The reason, they said, is that U.S. funds are issued directly under the aid pro-

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grams to the companies that supply the products, rather than to the Vietnamese government.

The FBI spokesman said the bureau began investigating the \$250,000 theft April 22 and expects to present the results to the U.S. attorney for possible prosecution later this week.

The spokesman declined to give further details.

However, a reliable source said the two Vietnamese officials used a check that had previously been signed in blank by embassy officials authorized to sign checks.

One of these officials, Le Van Kim, director of the procurement office, said yesterday that he signed the check in blank because he was going out of the country on business.

He said the second officer whose signature was required, Ngyuen Dinh Hieu, signed the check in blank when he was told by the two embassy officials that the money was needed for a newspaper subscription.

Hieu was told the subscription cost about \$140, but the exact amount was not known.

For that reason, Kim said, Hieu signed the check without filling in the amount. Kim said he did not know why Hieu had not filled in the name of the newspaper that was supposed to receive the money.

Kim said the two officials who have disappeared subsequently wrote the check to "cash" for \$250,000.

He said Hieu first learned of the theft April 22, when

Madison National Bank informed him that the account was overdrawn. South Vietnamese Minister Phan Van Thinh said yesterday that he then reported the matter to the FBI.

The source said the Vietnamese embassy has removed diplomatic immunity for the officials believed responsible for the theft.

Kim said that although the two officials who took the money normally transacted business with the bank, "I am surprised the bank allowed them to get cash in \$20 bills for that amount."

Officials of the bank did not return telephone calls made by a reporter yesterday.