

Chicago Tribune

MetroChicago

WEDNESDAY, JULY 10, 1996

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Uniforms may be Hyatt attack clue

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and John Kass

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

Did the intruder who beat and choked a teenage girl in her hotel room at the Hyatt Regency Chicago hotel pass himself off as a uniformed security guard?

If so, did he then slip away unnoticed, shedding that clothing outside the hotel at 151 E. Wacker Drive?

Police investigating the June 29 assault, one of two such crimes at the Hyatt in the last two weeks, said Tuesday that portions of two security uniforms were found on the grounds of the hotel that night and may have been worn by her assailant or assailants.

Investigators also acknowledged that a former Hyatt guard is being sought for questioning and several current and former

employees may be asked to undergo polygraph testing.

A \$50,000 reward offered Monday by the hotel for information about the attacks brought a flurry of calls Tuesday but no arrests, police said.

In the latest attack Sunday night, a 24-year-old Hyatt guard told police she was grabbed and punched from behind while making her rounds.

In the earlier case, the girl's

attacker choked her with her belt, leaving it looped around her neck. In the guard's attack, her assailant placed a wire coat hanger around her neck.

Neither incident appeared to be sexually motivated, police said.

The clothing could explain how an assailant could move unnoticed about the hotel and enter the room of the 15-year-old New Jersey victim, Police Supt.

Matt Rodriguez said Tuesday.

The girl was found by her father, who called police. She suffered multiple jaw fractures, a damaged eye socket and other injuries and is recovering.

"These are leads," Rodriguez said of the pieces of clothing that are being analyzed at the police crime laboratory. "How good of a lead ... we don't know yet."

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He also warned downtown hotel operators to cooperate with police commanders and stop what he said is a practice of underreporting crimes at their establishments.

"There has been some concern from district commanders about the underreporting of crime from the hotels," Rodriguez said. "It's something we have to know, and it's something we will address."

A former hotel security expert disputed Rodriguez's remarks about the failure of hotels to report crimes, describing the comments as outdated.

Major hotels take crime seriously and routinely alert police to crimes against property and people, said Arthur Bilek, a Chicago criminologist and a former head of corporate security for the Hilton Hotels.

"They immediately report to authorities all incidents of guest theft or assault as well as any fire incidents," he said.

He conceded it wasn't always that way.

"Before the 1970s," Bilek said, "many hotels were very reluctant to report crime or fires for fear of losing guests. That attitude changed when hotels began hiring professional security people and got rid of hotel detectives. By the 1980s, hotel attorneys and accountants stressed accountability, and guests today are encouraged to make reports."

"Hotels want to be safe rather than sorry."

Rodriguez said underreporting of crime will be discussed next week at a police seminar for hotel managers.

The two attacks have created a public-relations nightmare for the Hyatt Regency, the designated headquarters for the Democratic Party during its August national convention.

Mayor Richard Daley said that Hyatt's security problems would have no impact on the convention.

Earlier, Rodriguez refused to say if investigators think the attacks were unrelated.



Tribune photo by Nancy Stone

On the surface, at least, things are back to normal Tuesday at the Hyatt Regency after the two recent attacks.

"I'm not prepared to say either way whether they're related or not," Rodriguez said. "I wouldn't rule out two offenders or a single offender. We don't have enough information to make that determination."

On Tuesday, David Verzello, an Atlanta business executive who says he was beaten Jan. 23 while using a public telephone in the

lobby, filed suit in Cook County Circuit Court accusing the Hyatt of lax security.

Still pending is a suit filed by an Indiana nurse who contends that poor security caused her to be beaten and robbed in her room April 9, 1994.

Tribune reporter Graeme Zielinski contributed to this article.

7-10-96
Chicago Trib.