

Beat: Travel

Remains found in Panama believed to belong to missing Dutch girls

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USPA News - Suspected human remains which were discovered in Panama this week likely belong to two young women from the Netherlands who disappeared earlier this year, Dutch police said on Friday. Personal possessions of the women have also been found.

Kris Kremers, 21, and Lianne Froom, 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 that is popular with tourists and is generally considered to be safe. The investigation had come to a virtual standstill until last week, when a resident of a remote area came across a backpack while planting rice along a river. The woman who found the backpack was aware of the missing women and informed a neighbor in Boquete, who then alerted authorities. Investigators confirmed the backpack contained the women's mobile phones, an insurance card, and a digital camera. The discovery of the women's backpack prompted a new search effort, which led investigators to apparent human remains along with shoes in the same area. Dutch police said they believe the remains belong to the missing women, but a police spokesman said only DNA testing would be able to provide definitive answers. The shoes that were found with the remains have only been sold in the Netherlands. In an initial response on Friday, the families of the two women said they were "strongly taking into consideration" that the remains belong to Kremers and Froom. "DNA investigations will possibly take longer than previously thought," said Nikki van Passel, who acts as a spokeswoman for the families. "It will most likely take until after the weekend until the results can provide a definitive answer." The families thanked the media for their interest and support during the search for the women, but they now request to be left alone after Thursday's discovery. "Although it is not yet 100 percent certain that it is Kris and Lianne, the shock surrounding the developments is great and the families want to process the news in quiet, and ask others to take this into account," Van Passel said. The women had left for Panama on March 15 and were due to return home at the end of April. They first traveled to Bocas del Toro to vacation and to learn Spanish for two weeks before they went to Boquete, where they were due to volunteer at a local school for the remainder of their trip. When the women arrived in Boquete on March 29, however, they were told there had been a problem which meant 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 an earlier interview on Dutch television. According to investigators, on the morning of April 1, the women had visited the school where they initially expected to volunteer and went online to look at a route of the Pianista Path which they were considering to walk. They left the school at around 11 a.m. and were then seen near another school at around 1 p.m. before walking towards the town's center. The last confirmed sighting of the women was reported by a pension holder who said he had seen them several times that afternoon. He said the women initially asked him 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. When the women returned about an hour later, apparently after taking the route suggested by the man, the women told the man they were tired and wanted to go back to Boquete. They asked the man for help to return to the town and inquired whether they should take a taxi or a bus. "He advised them to take a taxi. 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," Dutch police spokesman Bernhard Jens said in late April. He added that it appeared unlikely that the women had gotten lost, which raised the possibility that the women were the victims of a crime. Investigators had previously downplayed reports from several witnesses who believed they had seen the women between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. at or near the Pianista Path. But Jens said it was unlikely that the women - who he described as responsible and well-prepared - would have started the hike on Pianista Path that late and were then overtaken by the darkness. Since then, however, investigators in Panama have said that the backpack's discovery along the river was definite proof that the women did take the Pianista Path because the route leads to the river. It remains unknown what may have happened to the women after they took the Pianista Path, and it is unclear whether investigators still believe the women may have been the victims of a crime. 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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