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Two US embassy personnel shot in Venezuela

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CARACAS — Two employees of the US embassy in Venezuela were shot and wounded early Tuesday in the capital Caracas, in a murky incident that local media and a police source said took place at a strip club.

"We can confirm that two members of the US embassy in Caracas were injured during an incident early this morning," State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell told reporters in Washington.

"Medical staff inform us that their injuries are not life-threatening," he added, noting that they were hurt at "some sort of a social spot" but without specifying the venue or nature of their injuries.

US diplomatic sources later confirmed to AFP that the two men were shot.

The Venezuelan media identified the two men as Roberto Ezequiel Rosas and Paul Marwin, and said they were military attaches at the embassy, but neither the State Department nor

the embassy in Caracas would confirm those reports.

"My understanding is that they are other agency personnel, not from the State Department," Ventrell said.

Venezuelan television channel Globovision reported on its website that the incident took place at the Antonella bar located in a shopping center in the Chacao district of Caracas, after an altercation with other bar patrons.

Bar staff told AFP on condition of anonymity that the venue is indeed a strip club that only admits men over the age of 30, but refused to say anything about the alleged incident involving the US embassy personnel.

A district policeman, who also spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity, said a shooting incident had been reported just outside the Antonella bar, involving three Americans.

In the entryway of the club, there are photos of female strippers.

Venezuela has the highest murder rate in South America with 54 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. In the first quarter of 2013 alone, there were 3,400 murders, according to government statistics.

Several diplomats have been assaulted in recent months in the

country.

The United States and Venezuela, which have had no ambassadors since 2010, have had strained relations since Caracas accused Washington of backing a coup that briefly ousted the late Hugo Chavez in 2002.

President Nicolas Maduro, Chavez's former vice president, has maintained a confrontational stance with the US government since his election on April 14, calling President Barack Obama the "grand chief of devils."

Foreign Minister Elias Jaua, however, said two weeks ago that the new government was prepared to normalize relations with the United States, beginning with a return of Venezuela's ambassador to Washington.

Despite the tensions, Venezuela sells the United States 900,000 barrels of oil a day.