

Held Hostage: Italians in the Hands of their Captors

Natasha Lardera (March 12, 2012)



Following the failed hostage rescue by the British commandos in Nigeria where an Italian and a Brit were killed, thoughts go to the other Italian hostages who have been missing for months. Silence can ensure the positive outcome of the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but it should not be mistaken for social oblivion.

An autopsy on the body of **Franco Lamolinara**, the Italian hostage killed in Nigeria last week during an unsuccessful British-Nigerian rescue mission, discovered that he was shot at close range in the head.

The 47-year-old engineer, who had been working in Nigeria for about ten years for 'Stabilini Visinoni Limited,' a leading Engineering, Civil Works and Construction Company in Nigeria, was captured by an Islamist militant group along with British citizen **Christopher McManus**, on May 12, 2011 and since then the governments of both countries had worked hard in rescuing the two with diplomacy... up to last Thursday when the Brits failed in a raid to rescue the hostages while the Italians had been kept in the dark.

Italian president **Giorgio Napolitano**, in comments to reporters, said the British decision to take action "without informing or consulting" Italy was "inexplicable," while Italian Foreign Minister **Giulio Terzi** said that the "tragic killing" of Lamolinara would be discussed in parliament and that British Foreign Minister **William Hague** is expected for a meeting in Rome "within the next few days." The



controversy seems to be focused less on the failure of the raid, however, than on the apparent diplomatic slight.

A spokesman for Mr. **Cameron** said Britain and Italy had been in close contact since the men were captured and that Britain had not consulted with the Monti government in planning the raid. "We contacted the Italians as the operation was getting under way, but this was a very fast-moving situation. Our priority was to respond to the situation on the ground and to do everything we could to try and secure the safe release of the two hostages." He added that indeed Mr. Cameron spoke to Mr. Monti afterward, informing him that the two hostages were dead.

This last incident, along with the false announcement of the freeing of another hostage, the humanitarian worker **Rossella Urru**, a 29 year old Sardinian representative of the Committee for the Development of Peoples (Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli, CISP) who is missing since October 2011 in Algeria, has brought the current situation of Italian hostages in the world to the attention of the international media.

At the moment humanitarians, tourists and sailors, are the Italian citizens that are still held captive and need to be rescued. The so-called "hot area" where the Crisis Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in collaboration with other national institutions, is busy working on the safety and liberation of the current hostages, goes from Western Africa area to Northeast Africa.

Rossella Urru, Maria Sandra Mariani, Giovanni Lo Porto, and six crew members of the cargo ship Enrico levoli are still awaiting liberation. Sadly Franco Lamolinara has been removed from the list of those to be saved.

Rossella Urru, who comes from Sardinia, and her Spanish colleagues, **Ainhoa Fernandez Rincon and Enrico Gonyans**, were abducted on October 23, 2011 from the Rabuni refugee camp in southwestern Algeria. She had spent two years working there before being kidnapped. At first, not much was reported about the abduction. The Crisis Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had asked for silence in order not to interfere with the freedom operations. Back in December a video distributed by the press showed that the three hostages were still alive, then silence struck again.

Such silence was broken during the past edition of the Sanremo music festival where a Sardinian comedian **Geppi Cucciari** talked about the young humanitarian. That has resulted in a wide campaign that has involved other people from the entertainment business. Fiorello, one of Italy's top showmen, has publicly spoken about the issue to 400.000 people who follow his daily radio show and asked people on twitter to change their profile picture and put Rossella's photo instead in order to increase awareness and show their solidarity with the family. The family has opened a blog where they post letters and information. Confusion broke last week when the press announced that Rossella had been freed, but everything had to be reiterated shortly after. As of now, for all we know, Rossella is still in the hands of her captors.

"I am Italian and I was kidnapped on Wednesday, February 2, in Algeria. I am still being held by the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Tarek ibn Zyad battalion. I am asking Al-Arabiya to air this statement," the hostage, identified as **Maria Sandra Mariani**, said in halting French on February 18, 2011. The 53 year old woman from San Casciano in Val di Pesa, (in the province of Florence), was abducted in Alidena, an area about 80 miles south of Djanet, the main town in southeastern Algeria. Three Algerians - a driver, a security guard and a guide - who accompanied her were freed following the abduction.

Giovanni Lo Porto, a 38 year old from Palermo was kidnapped by the terrorist organization Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) this past October with a German colleague, Bernd Johannes, in the Pakistani part of Punjab. He was working on the construction of emergency lodging in southern Punjab. In an interview with Fides Mehdi Hasan, a board member of the NGO Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) explains: "The Taliban kidnap aid workers mainly because they fear the work of awareness that NGOs perform in the country. They feel threatened by social work but above all cultural: their ability to affect the mentality of the people, on the esteem that can be generated towards civil society, towards an idea of rights that NGOs promote, this can affect their extremist ideology. As NGOs we are careful to monitor the situation. We continue to urge the government to



increase the standard of human rights and the protection of humanitarian workers.”

6 Italian crew members on the cargo ship Enrico levoli owned by the Naples-based company Marnavi, that was carrying a cargo of caustic soda from the United Arab Emirates to the Mediterranean, were seized by pirates off the coast of Oman in the Gulf of Aden this past December. The area is known for the frequent attacks of Somali pirates. The crew also included five Ukrainians and seven Indians.

In 2006, an Enrico levoli cargo ship was attacked by pirates but at the first time the captain raised an alarm in time and managed to prevent the hijack. Three other hijacked Italian vessels were freed from Somali pirates in November and December, two of them reportedly following ransom payments (According to the International Maritime Bureau, there were 352 reported hijackings worldwide between January and September 2011).

“Together with the crisis unit, I am closely following the hijacking of the levoli,” Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi said in the past, calling for “strict discretion to ensure a positive outcome.”

Keeping silent is definitely respectful yet silence can often be mistaken as social oblivion, and the destiny of these fellow Italians should never be forgotten but kept fresh in our minds.

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