

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Mali - Mauritania - Niger: Amnesty International calls for the release of all hostages held by Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate release of two Spanish aid workers, Alberto Vilalta, aged 35, and Roque Pascual, aged 50, as well as a 78 year old French national Michel Germaneau, a humanitarian activist, abducted by self-proclaimed members of the organization al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Amnesty International is particularly concerned by the fact that on 11 July 2010, AQIM threatened to kill Michel Germaneau within the next 15 days unless the French government meets its demands for the release of prisoners.

Michel Germaneau, a retired engineer, was captured at Inabangaret, northern Niger, in April 2010 and Amnesty International is concerned about his detention in the Sahel desert. In May 2010, AQIM released a picture and audio of Michel Germaneau in which he said he had a serious medical problem. Amnesty International learnt that he suffers from cardio vascular disease and needs regular treatment and medicines.

Amnesty International is also concerned by the extremely harsh conditions in which the hostages are likely to be held in the Sahel desert. One former hostage held by the AQIM told Amnesty International: "In June-July, it is incredibly hot (more than 55 degrees, day and night). With the blanket over a dry tree, I had only two square metres of shade. Concerning the food, I had only rice and plain spaghetti, but enough. I also always had enough water. Sometimes, I was verbally insulted and some of them called me "Chrétiens chiens" (Christians are dogs). They also tried to convert the hostages to Islam. Some young guards used to shoot in the air or used to point at me with their Kalashnikov. I complained to the leader and they stopped".

Another former hostage told Amnesty International that after protesting he was punished and had to stay under the mid day sun for two hours, he was told by the abductors that: "Europeans could not stay for more than five hours under that sun".

The two other remaining Spanish hostages were abducted on 29 November 2009 by self proclaimed members of the AQIM in Mauritania. Amnesty International learnt that one of them, Alberto Vilalta, was wounded by a bullet in the leg at the time of his abduction.

Hostage-taking is expressly prohibited by international law. Amnesty International calls on AQIM to end the practice of hostage-taking and immediately and unconditionally release all hostages in circumstances that guarantee their safety and well-being. Any failure by AQIM to treat all captives humanely or any infliction of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or threats thereof would be fundamentally inconsistent with respect for the human rights of those it holds.

Background

Since 2008, self proclaimed members of AQIM abducted at least 15 foreign nationals as well as local drivers. One of them, Edwin Dyer, a British national abducted in January 2009, was reportedly killed by AQIM, presumably because the British authorities refused to meet their demands.

AQIM formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) has claimed a series of attacks in the region since 2003. This group reportedly intends to unify armed Islamist groups in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco as well as emerging groups in countries bordering the Sahara including Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, and Eritrea.

Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 prohibits the taking of hostages, murder and cruel treatment and torture. It reflects fundamental principles that apply at all times and places, in peace-time as well as in armed conflict.

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