

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL WEB FEATURE

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Alan Johnston's release greeted in Gaza

Here in Gaza, the release early this morning of BBC journalist Alan Johnston has been greeted with great joy and relief. He had been held as a hostage for almost four months by a group calling itself the Army of Islam.

Amnesty International, along with so many others here and around the world, had made repeated calls for his release. Prior to his abduction on 12 March, as the only international journalist based here, his reporting was very important to keeping the wider world informed about the situation in Gaza and the difficult conditions to which the 1.5 million Palestinians who live in this small strip of territory are exposed.

Before Alan's abduction, other foreigners and also Palestinians had been abducted by the same armed group, but, in all cases, they were released unharmed within a few hours or days. It was extremely worrying then when Alan's abduction broke this pattern and videos were released by his captors threatening to kill him.

His case was symptomatic of a rising pattern of lawlessness by rival armed groups, fuelled by the growing divide between the two main Palestinian political parties, Fateh and Hamas, and their armed militias which eventually erupted into heavy street fighting three weeks ago.

I arrived in Gaza last Sunday after spending the best part of a week in the West Bank, interviewing people affected by the recent violence. First impressions are that the situation here is a lot calmer as one side, Hamas, is now seemingly in total control and seeking to restore order.

But the situation for ordinary Palestinians remains very hard due to the blockades and closures imposed by the Israeli authorities, who continue to control all movements of people and goods into the Gaza Strip. Currently, some 5,000 Palestinians are stranded on the Egyptian side of the border awaiting permission to return to their homes and families here.

Many of the people in Gaza liken their own situation to a form of imprisonment in an area experiencing very high levels of poverty and unemployment. Amid all the problems, though, the release of Alan Johnston, safe and well after a terrifying ordeal, is tremendous news and a great source of encouragement to many people here.

For further information, please see:

Amnesty International welcomes release of Alan Johnston (Feature, 4 July 2007)

<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/pse-040707-feature-eng>

Palestinian Authority: Amnesty International renews its appeal for release of Alan Johnston (Public Statement, 25 June 2007)

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engMDE210122007>

Press Freedom Day: Global action needed to protect journalists (Feature, 3 May 2007)

<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/315-030507-feature-eng>

AI calls for release of journalist held in Gaza (Feature, 15 April 2007)

<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/pse-160407-news-eng>