

Religious leaders urge release of remaining Korean hostages: WCC head visits families

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As religious leaders around the world called for the release of South Korean church volunteers held hostage in Afghanistan, the head of the World Council of Churches visited in mid-August with families of the humanitarian workers caught up in the ongoing fight between the U.S.-backed government and the overthrown Taliban.

Methodist minister Samuel Kobia, WCC general secretary, met August 14 with some of the families while on a trip to South Korea. The day before, the militant Muslims released two women in what the kidnappers called a gesture of good will.

Following the July 19 abduction of 23 Koreans from a bus, the captors demanded the release of 21 Taliban fighters held in Afghan and American custody. The kidnapping victims were from Saemmul Community Church (Presbyterian) in Bundang, South Korea. Their leader, Bae Hyung-Kyu, 42, was found dead July 25. A second hostage, Shim Sung-min, 29, was reported dead July 31.

Released to waiting International Red Cross vehicles in rural Afghanistan on August 13 were Kim Kyong-ja, 37, and Kim Ji-na, 32, who were transferred to a U.S. military base.

Afghan president Hamid Karzai has vowed not to trade any Taliban prisoners for civilian hostages, declaring that to do so would encourage more kidnapping.

In South Korea, the church group has been criticized heavily for its naïveté in traveling to a dangerous zone in Afghanistan. Noting the public outcry, the families of the two released women issued a statement apologizing for causing the problem, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

The Koreans are the biggest group of foreign hostages taken since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan.

During his 40-minute meeting with families at the Presbyterian church near Seoul, Kobia told them “that the prayers of millions of Christians around the world” are being offered for the speedy and safe release of their relatives.

Kobia was accompanied by Kwon Oh-Sung, the general secretary of the National Council of Churches in Korea, and Jung Hae-Sun, a member of the WCC executive committee and central committee. During the meeting, Kobia expressed the hope that “our world will become the kind of world where human beings can express support of other human beings, without our acts of charity being viewed with suspicion.”

On the same day, South Korea’s Yonhap news agency reported that members of the Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace had issued a declaration calling for the release of the hostages on “humanitarian grounds” and opposing “military action that could endanger” their lives.

The report said that Nobel Peace Prize winners such as Tibet’s Dalai Lama, South Africa’s Desmond Tutu and Mairead Maguire of Northern Ireland are members of the global peace group. “One of the group’s aims is to halt the use of religion as a weapon of war, and to make it a true tool for the advancement of peace and harmony,” it said.

In Geneva, the general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, Ishmael Noko, called on the Taliban “to release the remaining hostages unharmed, and to cease targeting civilians in their political and military campaign.”

Added Noko, a Zimbabwean: “This crisis should be resolved by negotiation, rather than by military or other means that might put the lives of the hostages at further risk.” -*Ecumenical News International, Associated Baptist Press*