

TWO ABDUCTED U.S. MISSIONARIES KILLED IN SKIRMISH

Concern Rises for Four Other Missionary Hostages

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

QUITO, Ecuador, June 21 (NNI)--Two U.S. Protestant missionaries kidnapped in January 1994 by left-wing Colombian guerrillas were killed on Monday during a skirmish between the guerrillas and government troops.

The bodies of New Tribes Mission workers Steve Welsh, of North Platte, Nebraska, and Timothy Van Dyke, of New Albany, Pennsylvania, were identified by a mission representative, according to an official statement from the Sanford, Florida-based group.

The New Tribes release stated that the U.S. Embassy in Bogota notified the mission agency about the murders yesterday.

An army official in Bogota claimed that the missionaries were shot dead by guerrillas who were attempting to escape the approaching troops. He said the military later recovered the bodies. The confrontation took place near Medina, a town 30 miles southeast of Bogota.

"It appears that the Colombian military were on patrol and spotted the guerrillas and some shooting broke out, and our fellows were killed in that skirmish," said Scott Ross, a New Tribes representative.

New Tribes officials declined to comment on a local report that suggested it was actually Colombian military fire that killed the missionaries.

"Any information on the circumstances of the deaths will have to come from the appropriate authorities," asserted the mission statement. "However, we do think that it is appropriate to remember that it was guerrillas who kidnapped these men and who held them under very dangerous circumstances for over a year."

The two missionaries had been in Colombia with their wives and children for several years working at a school for missionaries' children near the town of Villavicencio. They were kidnapped by members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia on January 16, 1994.

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The murders have heightened concerns about four additional U.S. Protestant missionaries also being held captive by Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia rebels. Three other New Tribes missionaries, Charles David Mankins, Mark V. Rich and Richard L. Tenenoff, have been missing since their abduction near the Panama-Colombia border in January 1993. Ray Rising of Wycliffe Bible Translators' Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) was kidnapped on March 31, 1994.

"In light of the tragedy of the deaths of Steve and Tim, [New Tribes Mission] calls on the captors of these other missionaries to release them immediately to prevent any further bloodshed to these men of God," stated the official New Tribes release.

Representatives of Rising's organization also called for the immediate release of all remaining missionary hostages in Colombia. Wycliffe Bible Translators spokesperson Arthur Lightbody told NNI that in mid-May, SIL representatives in Colombia received information that Rising would be released to them at a specified location. However, when they arrived at the site, Rising was not there.

"We don't know if someone tried to get him away from [his captors] and couldn't or if it was just a hoax," Lightbody said. He added that his organization does not see a "direct connection between [Welsh and Van Dyke's murders] and the circumstances of Ray Rising's captivity or the effort to secure his release."

There has been no verified sighting of Rising nor any word from him since late September. There has been no contact with the other New Tribes missionaries or their captors for more than a year.

New Tribes spokesperson Lucille Sanford told NNI that while most agency missionaries left Colombia "quite a while ago," several are remaining to carry on the New Tribes' Bible translation and church planting work. "We still want to continue as long as we're welcome in Colombia," she said. "That's what [Welsh and Van Dyke] gave their lives for."

In Colombia, several political and religious leaders have accused the government of not working hard enough to free the hostages. During a visit to Washington, D.C. last week, Colombian Senator Jaime Ortiz told NNI that "to this point, the government has been indifferent" to the plight of the kidnapped missionaries.

Van Dyke is survived by his wife, Lorraine, and four children: Tim, 16; Tracy, 14;, Katrina, 13; and Jacqueline, 11. Welsh is survived by his wife, Sandy, and three children: Scott, 21; Shannon, 21; and Shad, 20.

Reported by NNI Correspondent Kenneth D. MacHarg. Additional reporting by Elisabeth Farrell in Orlando, Florida, and Kim Lawton in Washington.

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