

Freed missionary in U.S. after Ecuador kidnapping

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Nazarene missionary Don Cox flew to the United States for a Christmas day reunion with family after being rescued from a band of kidnapers.

Cox, 51, had been kidnapped from the Nazarene regional seminary in the northern suburbs of Quito on December 10. Nazarene General Secretary Jack Stone confirmed to NNI that Cox was held for ransom. Local newspapers in Ecuador said the kidnapers demanded \$500,000 for his release, and threatened to kill him if the ransom was not paid.

The veteran missionary was rescued by Ecuadorian police who raided a mountain camp north of Quito on the morning of December 24 after reportedly tracing telephone calls from the abductors and following members of the guerrilla group to the camp.

Three guerrillas were reported killed in the rescue attempt. Local news reports indicated that two suspects fled during the shoot-out with police.

There were conflicting reports about who was responsible for the kidnapping. A mission executive (Kim, to make clear, this person is NOT with the Nazarenes) close to the negotiations, who asked not to be identified, told NNI that the arm of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) which kidnapped Cox is made up of around 100 members.

Local newspapers, however, reported that the band consisted of around a dozen men, Colombian and Ecuadorian, who had been involved in up to ten previous kidnappings in Ecuador. The Quito newspaper "Hoy" reported that the group involved some people with ties to FARC.

Police from a special anti-kidnapping unit said they hoped to capture the remaining members of the gang within a few days.

FARC is believed responsible for the kidnapping in Panama of New Tribe's missionaries Charles David Mankins, Mark V. Rich and Richard L. Teneoff who have been missing since January 1993, and Wycliffe Bible Translator's missionary Ray Rising who was abducted in Colombia in March of 1994.

In a public statement, Nazarene spokesman Mark Graham at the denominational headquarters in Kansas City said that Cox was "safe and secure." Ecuador newspapers reported that a physical check-up right after his release showed he was in good health, but nervous.

Cox was abducted when he went to the seminary to sell a car which he had parked on campus with a "For Sale" sign.

"People came under the pretense of looking at the car," Graham said. Witnesses at the seminary reported seeing the car speed off with Cox inside and someone else driving. The car was later found abandoned, he said.

Quito's "El Comercio" newspaper reported that Cox was blindfolded and driven off in his own car.

Nazarene officials formed a crisis management team in Ecuador, and worked with Ecuadorian law enforcement officials, the U.S. Embassy, and FBI personnel to solve the case. The Guayaquil newspaper "El Universo" reported that 12 FBI agents were flown in from the United States to work on the kidnapping. Specialists in missionary hostage cases also participated in the planning.

In response to the kidnapping, Nazarene officials evacuated their missionaries in Quito, saying that they were giving them "an extended vacation." Unconfirmed reports say that the kidnapers had threatened the Nazarene mission personnel in Ecuador.

The Guayaquil newspaper "El Telegrafo" reported that on December 11, the day after Cox was kidnapped, his wife received a telephone call from the abductors, threatening to deliver his severed hands and feet in a plastic bag if they did not receive their ransom payment by December 26.

Ironically, the Nazarene church had relocated their regional seminary to Quito from Peru several years ago to avoid threats from Peru's Shining Path guerrillas.

The Spanish EFE news service reported that Cox said he was feeling fine and did not know yet if he would return to service in Ecuador. Cox told the news service that he was sad that such a beautiful location where he was held in the mountains of Ecuador would be used for such sinister purposes.

"El Universo" newspaper reported that Cox was forced to sleep sitting up during the two weeks of his captivity.

Quito's "Hoy" newspaper reported that police yelled to Cox to lie on the floor as they began their rescue attempt. The newspaper said that Cox complied, and that his action "saved his life."

Cox and his family, who are from Illinois, had served with the Nazarene church in Quito since 1991. Prior to that they had worked as missionaries in Chile for a number of years.

Meanwhile, the U.S. embassy in Quito has issued a special advisory to all American citizens in the country, warning them to take extra precautions because of what it called "a continued increase in the number of kidnappings" in the country.

Ecuador ranks second behind Colombia and ahead of Brazil in Latin America in the number of kidnappings each year. The majority of abductions are for the extortion of money, and local news reports indicate that most are never reported to the police.

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