

NAZARENE MISSIONARY ABDUCTED AT QUITO SEMINARY

by Kenneth D. MacHarg

QUITO, Ecuador, Dec. 12 (NNI)--A U.S. Nazarene missionary remains missing in Ecuador after being abducted in Quito on Sunday by unknown assailants.

Don Cox, 51, from Illinois, was kidnapped at the regional Nazarene seminary in the northern suburbs of Quito. According to Nazarene officials, he had gone to the seminary on Sunday afternoon to try to sell a car that he had parked on campus with a "For Sale" sign.

"People came under the pretense of looking at the car," said Mark Graham, coordinator for the Nazarene News Service. Graham told NNI that witnesses at the seminary reported seeing the car speed off with Cox inside, and someone else driving. The car was later found abandoned, he added.

Graham said the denomination has "no indication that [Cox] was harmed during the abduction."

The Nazarene spokesman declined to discuss whether the church has been contacted by the abductors. "We have people prepared to discuss his release with his captors," Graham said, although he added that the church still does not have "any valid claim of identity from the group or individuals responsible" or any idea about what motivated the abduction.

Graham declined to comment on unconfirmed reports from Quito that family members have received at least one telephone call from individuals claiming to be part of the Colombian leftist rebel group FARC. FARC rebels are believed to be holding four U.S. missionaries hostage in Colombia.

However, some missionaries discounted the claim because FARC had not previously been known to operate in Ecuador as far south as Quito.

Graham also refused to elaborate on the church's policy with regard to paying ransom for hostages. "We will do what we can to assume the safe release of Rev. Cox," he said.

Cox and his wife, Cheryl, have worked in Colombia since 1991. They have four sons.

Reported by Kenneth MacHarg in Quito and Kim A. Lawton in Washington.

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