

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Niger – Mali: Amnesty International calls for the release of hostages reportedly held by Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate release of two Canadian diplomats, one of them a UN envoy and their driver as well as of four European tourists whose abduction a group calling itself al-Qa’ida Organization in the Islamic Maghreb has claimed responsibility for on 18 February 2009.

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of these people following a statement posted on Al-Jazeera's website in which a spokesman of this group said that "(The Mujahideen) reserves the right to deal with the six captives under Islamic Sharia (law)."

The organization urges al-Qa’ida Organization in the Islamic Maghreb to treat these hostages humanely and not to subject them to threats or cruel treatment or torture, and to cease taking and holding hostages.

Amnesty International stresses that holding of hostages, either civilians or armed forces' members, violates the fundamental rights to life, physical and mental integrity and liberty, and is expressly prohibited by international law.

The organization calls on al-Qa’ida Organization in the Islamic Maghreb which reportedly claimed responsibility for these hostage taking to abide by fundamental principles derived from Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which reflects customary international law, and which prohibits the taking of hostages, murder and cruel treatment and torture.

Background

Two Canadians, UN envoy to Niger Robert Fowler and his colleague Louis Guay went missing outside Niamey in mid-December 2008 along with their driver, Soumana Moukaila, when returning from a visit to a gold mine operated by Canadian company Semafo.

On 22 January 2009, a Swiss couple, an elderly German woman and a British man were kidnapped by unidentified gunmen along the border of Mali and Niger while returning from a Tuareg cultural festival in Mali.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), has claimed a series of attacks in the region in recent years, including the kidnapping last year of two Austrian tourists abducted in Tunisia who were later freed in Mali.

This group reportedly intends to unify armed Islamist groups in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco as well as emerging groups in countries bordering the Sahara including Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, and Eritrea.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org