

Released hostages greet freedom with burgers and pizza in Philippines

BY JIM GOMEZ
ASSOCIATED PRESS

JOLO, PHILIPPINES — Five foreign hostages released by Muslim rebels walked into freedom Sunday looking stunned, some in tears and leaving family members still captive in the jungle on a remote Philippine island.

The Abu Sayyaf separatist guerrillas released the four women and one man after Libya agreed to pay \$1 million for each, negotiators said. The rebels were still holding seven other Westerners and 12 Filipinos.

Libyan Ambassador Saleem Adam dismissed allegations that his country was trying to improve its international image by bankrolling the ransom. "This is a humanitarian mission, he said. "It has no other motivation."

Freedom was bittersweet for the former hostages, most of whom wore flip-flops and carried their meager possessions in rice sacks when they met their ambassadors after stepping off helicopters in the port city of Zamboanga, not far from the island where they were held.

"We're not happy because there are people left behind," said French citizen Marie Moarbes. "It's not finished yet for us."

The others freed were Sonia Wendling of France, South African Monique Strydom, German Werner Wallert, and Maryse Burgot, a French journalist.

"My son is still there. You don't expect me to be happy," Wallert said. Strydom's husband also remains a hostage.

An envoy said Wallert and his son, Marc, cried and embraced for a long time before parting, each insisting that the other should go. Finally, the envoy led the father away. Wallert's wife, Renate, was freed last month.

Wendling, rubbing her eyes in apparent disbelief, said she could never forget her four months in captivity. "I don't know how to describe the experience," she

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Marie Moarbes
French Citizen

said.

The mood was much more upbeat later on a Philippine Air Force cargo plane that ferried the released hostages to the Philippine city of Cebu, where they were to spend Sunday night.

They clinked cans of soda and wolfed down cheeseburgers and pizza, their first meal since leaving the rebel camp some six hours earlier. But mostly they talked on and on about their experiences to diplomats and relatives on board the plane.

The former hostages and their ambassadors ignored the plane's uncomfortable seats and its occasional bumps and dips as they celebrated. Moarbes clutched a teddy bear given to her by her father as the two talked animatedly for the entire one-hour flight.

All but the journalist were kidnapped April 23 while vacationing at a Malaysian diving resort and brought by boat to Jolo, an impoverished island near the Philippines' southern tip. Burgot was seized with two other French television journalists last month when they visited the rebel camp.

The Abu Sayyaf, the smaller of two Muslim rebel groups in the southern Philippines, says it is fighting for an independent Islamic state. The government insists the organization is a group of bandits practicing kidnapping and piracy.

The rebels have been holding the hostages for months in a jungle on Jolo, 580 miles south of Manila. Before the kidnapping they were estimated to number about

500 in the province but have grown to 5,000 as many recruits have been attracted by the large ransom payments, a military official said.

Still in captivity are one French, one German, two Finns and one South African kidnapped from the Malaysian resort, the two French journalists, and 12 Filipino Christian evangelists who went to the rebel camp to pray for the hostages.

Chief government negotiator Robert Aventajado said a "global agreement" had been reached for the release of all the other hostages within two weeks.

"But we're hopeful we will be able to work for the release of all the Sipadan hostages within one week," he said.

The military estimates the rebels were paid more than \$5.5 million for the earlier release of nine Malaysians and the German woman.

The rebels have insisted on freeing the hostages in batches to avert any military attack.

The hostages freed Sunday were to be flown the next day to Tripoli to meet with Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. Libya has long-standing ties to Muslim rebels in the mostly Catholic Philippines.

For years, Libya has helped mediate between Muslim guerrillas and the Philippine government and helped build schools and mosques in the impoverished south.

Firestone tire investigation slow, critics say

BY NEDRA PICKLER
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The first lawsuits alleging some Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. truck tires suddenly lost their tread were filed nearly a decade ago, but the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration didn't start investigating until May.

And that was nearly a year after Ford Motor Co. replaced Firestone tires on its vehicles in parts of Latin America, Asia and the Middle East.

Critics say the case illustrates a fundamental problem with the agency responsible for auto safety: NHTSA largely depends on manufacturers to police themselves and notify it when problems are uncovered.

"This has been going on for some number of years and the company (Firestone) never notified the agency, and that to me suggests a failure in the agency's program," said Joan Claybrook, president of watchdog group Public Citizen and a former director of NHTSA.

Some safety experts say NHTSA isn't to blame, but that Congress needs to grant the agency greater authority.

"NHTSA's doing as good a job as the authority and the weak teeth that they have," said Clarence Ditlow, director of the Center for Auto Safety. "They can only do what Congress gives them the authority to do."

The Center for Auto Safety is suing Bridgestone/Firestone and Ford to expand the recall to all ATX, ATX II and Wilderness brand tires. Ditlow said the group filed suit this week because it believed it could force a wider recall faster than NHTSA, which often takes several months to complete an investigation.

Bridgestone/Firestone announced a "voluntary" U.S. recall on Aug. 9 of 6.5 million P235/75R15 size Firestone ATX, ATX II and Wilderness AT tires, often found on Ford Explorers. The recall came three months after NHTSA opened the investigation.

On Friday, Bridgestone/Firestone announced it was scheduled to begin airing a television commercial this weekend that will inform the public about the recall.

NHTSA is monitoring the recall and continuing its investigation into 62 deaths — all reported since February — and more than 100 injuries that occurred in accidents where the Firestone tires may have been a factor. Since the recall began, at least two other deaths have been reported.

Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater and NHTSA Administrator Sue Bailey this week defended the agency's handling of the case. They say as soon as they found out the tires may have been responsible for fatalities, they began an investigation.

"I'm proud of the agency," Slater said. "I think the agency has done a

tremendous job and continues to do a tremendous job."

Still, Slater said he is considering proposing a rule that would require manufacturers to report to NHTSA when they are sued or have received repeated complaints about a possible defect.

"We can't monitor every court in the United States looking for private lawsuits related to a safety defect," said NHTSA spokesman Rae Tyson. "That's not practical. But on the other hand, there's nothing preventing a trial lawyer from contacting us."

NHTSA officials say Ford did not tell them about the recalls in Venezuela, Ecuador, Thailand, Malaysia, Colombia and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries.

Ford spokesman Mike Vaughn said the Middle Eastern recall started in August 1999, followed by Malaysia and Thailand in February and the South American countries in May.

Vaughn said there were many reports of tread separation on vehicles in those countries. He said Ford officials did not report it to NHTSA because they didn't see the same problem in the United States and attributed it to different environmental and usage patterns.

"It's very hot, people in these markets tend to drive very fast, full-throttle, for extended periods. We also saw poor repairs and overloading," he said. "In the United States, you don't see the same usage patterns."

Slater said NHTSA "should have known about the recalls in other countries," but he resisted criticizing Ford or Bridgestone/Firestone for not coming forward earlier. He said NHTSA must work with manufacturers to protect citizens and the "blame game" would hinder those efforts.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., plans to chair hearings starting Sept. 6 at which NHTSA officials can outline their actions. A McCain aide said the hearings would explore what policy changes could help NHTSA identify problems earlier.

Claybrook and other safety officials say NHTSA should be granted the authority to levy harsher penalties. The agency now can fine companies \$1,100 per violation, but only up to \$925,000.

In the Firestone case, "that's pennies per tire," Ditlow said.

The Clinton administration asked Congress this year to allow NHTSA to fine companies up to \$4 million, but no lawmaker took up the cause.

Sean Kane, a researcher with Strategic Safety, a group working with lawyers suing Ford and Bridgestone/Firestone, said he hopes the case prompts changes for NHTSA.

Flames engulf famous TV tower in Moscow

BY BARRY RENFREW
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MOSCOW — Fire spread Sunday through the Ostankino television tower, the world's second-tallest freestanding structure, knocking out most TV channels in the Russian capital and sending a plume of smoke over the city.

The 1,771-foot futuristic tower, shaped like a giant needle, is a popular tourist attraction, with an observation deck and restaurant about two-thirds up its height. The fire started well above that level and officials said all visitors were evacuated.

But some five hours after the fire broke out at 3:30 p.m., the fire had spread to the platform as well as farther up the tower's spire.

The fire started about 1,520 feet above ground and firefighters had problems fighting the blaze because of the difficulty of hauling equipment including chemical fire extinguishers to that height. The tower's spire is narrow at that point and the cramped quarters hampered movement.

Scores of fire engines and ambulances were parked at the bottom of the tower, which was lighted by at least three searchlights, as officials tried to

figure out a way to fight the blaze.

Yellow flames licked from the glassed-in platform as darkness fell on the city. Thousands of people thronged to the base of the tower, gathering in a carnival atmosphere, drinking beer, laughing and a few dancing to transistor radios.

A huge helicopter capable of dropping water from a giant bag was brought to the scene but it was not immediately deployed. Smaller helicopters occasionally circled the tower as firefighters tried to assess the situation.

The cause of the fire was not immediately known, but initial reports said it apparently was started by a short-circuit in equipment belonging to a paging company.

The fire caused most television service to the capital and its surrounding region to go off the air, including the three major channels NTV, RTR and ORT, and several smaller channels. NTV later was able to broadcast its news programs via the facilities of a UHF channel unaffected by the blaze.

China dumps religious objects in river, expels Tibetan Buddhist monks

Homes searched for pictures of Dalai Lama

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIJING — Officials in Chinese-ruled Tibet have expelled monks from Tibetan Buddhism's holiest shrine and ransacked homes looking for pictures of the Dalai Lama, a monitoring group reported Saturday.

Government teams began house-to-house searches in Tibet's capital, Lhasa, last month and have thrown religious objects and pictures of the Dalai Lama into the Tsangpo River, the London-based Tibetan Information Network reported.

Primarily targeting Communist Party members and government employees, including teachers, the general population has also been ordered to teach children atheism, the group said.

The actions are part of a 4-year-old campaign intended to break the fervently Buddhist Tibetan people's allegiance to the Dalai Lama, Tibet's temporal and spiritual leader who fled to India 41 years ago amid a failed uprising against Chinese rule.

Party and government leaders decided to renew the campaign at a meeting in April in Chengdu, the Sichuan provincial capital, Tibet Infor-

mation Network said.

It added that they were likely motivated by the escape to India in January of the Karmapa, a high-ranking cleric China hoped to use to win over Tibetans.

In stepping up the campaign, leaders at the meeting pinpointed religion as the main "element of destruction" in Tibetan society, the group said, citing sources it did not identify.

The Buddhist clergy, a target of the campaign from the start, appears to have come under renewed pressure.

Last month officials expelled 30 monks from the Jokhang Temple in central Lhasa, the group said.

The 1,300-year-old Jokhang is one of Tibetan Buddhism's oldest shrines and its most sacred. The group said the government has set a limit of 120 monks for the temple but is not allowing any who leave to be replaced.

Officials with the Tibetan government and its religious affairs bureau could not be reached by telephone for comment as offices were closed for the weekend.

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settle claims.

The campaign has frayed relations among some nations and drawn criticism that it dishonors victims by focusing too much on money.

"This isn't about the money," says spokeswoman Alissa Kaplan of the claims conference. "It's about moral responsibility and it's about historical accuracy."

Still, critics complain of "Holocaust fatigue" and a "Holocaust industry" of lawyers, paid negotiators, researchers, government envoys and other who make a living off the effort to reach the settlements.

Seventeen nations have established commissions to look into Holocaust issues.

U.S. companies, however, have succeeded in lying low while the battle played out across the ocean.

In recent years — since a U.S. lawsuit was filed against Ford Motor Co. — a number have hired historians to study wartime dealings. None has released findings, though some promise they will.

The U.S. lawsuit against Ford was dismissed. But Ford acknowledged that its German subsidiary, Ford-Werke AG, used Buchenwald concentration camp labor to build trucks and light armored vehicles in Cologne.

Werke is contributing \$13 million to the \$5 billion fund German government and industry agreed on for former laborers as a way to end U.S. lawsuits. After two years of negotiations, it began taking claims Aug. 12.

Ford's U.S. headquarters maintains it was not responsible for German operations after its assets were seized in 1941. It's an argument made by many American companies with German subsidiaries.

Deputy Treasury Secretary Stuart Eizenstat, top U.S. official on Holocaust issues, says some should donate nonetheless. "Among those benefiting from conscript labor were scores of companies owned in whole or part by American firms before they were nationalized by the Nazi regime," he said at the May 1 Chamber of Commerce announcement.

United reaches settlement with pilots

BY SOFIA JAVED
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — United Airlines and its pilots reached a tentative agreement Saturday in a contract dispute that forced the world's largest airline to cancel or delay thousands of flights.

The two sides met around-the-clock over the past two days, guided by the National Mediation Board. The key issues remaining in the talks were security and pay.

A spokesman for the pilots, Herb Hunter, would not provide any details of the agreement, which he said is retroactive to April 12. The agreement will be presented to the pilots next month.

United's labor problems began this spring when the contract with its 10,000 pilots came up for renewal.

Pilots began refusing to fly overtime,

which they are entitled to do, and that caused chaos with United's already-tight schedule. The pilots say the airline has long failed to hire enough pilots to carry out its packed schedule.

In separate statements, United Chairman James Goodwin and Rick Dubinsky, who heads the union's Master Executive Council, said they were pleased with the agreement.

"Both sides worked hard in complex negotiations to create an industry-leading contract for pilots, while providing a strong base for the company's future growth and success," Goodwin said.

United spokesman Joe Hopkins would not say how the tentative agreement would affect the airline's flight schedule.

United canceled thousands of flights this summer and had an abysmal on-time record. United apologized in newspa-

per ads and with a television commercial in which Goodwin says the airline has failed in its commitment to customers.

"This summer, thousands of people had their travel plans disrupted while flying United Airlines. If you were one of them, I want to apologize personally on behalf of United," Goodwin says from the cabin of a parked United jet in the commercial.

On Friday, United imposed a "critical coverage" plan, requiring almost all of its 22,000 North American flight attendants to be on standby for two hours every day for assignments to fly the next day. The overtime plan, in effect the last week of August, is similar to one issued in May, Hopkins said.

Hopkins said the dispute with pilots was not a factor in the overtime order. Instead, he said, the attendants' short-

age resulted from weather and air traffic control problems.

"We're a little shorter at the end of the month than we were at the beginning of the month," he said.

Phone messages left with the Association of Flight Attendants union Saturday were not immediately returned.

The order for flight attendants came on the heels of the airline's attempt to order mandatory overtime at some airports for its 15,000 mechanics, who also are negotiating for a new contract.

However, the mechanics' union threatened to stop contract negotiations if the airline didn't back down.

Hopkins said Saturday that mandatory overtime for mechanics would be used only if absolutely necessary. He said no mechanics were forced to work overtime Thursday or Friday.