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Ransom row after Italians freed

ROME, Italy -- Controversy continues to surround reports that the Italian government paid a ransom to free two female aid workers held hostage in Iraq for three weeks.

An enthusiastic crowd of family, friends and reporters greeted Simona Torretta and Simona Pari, both 29, when they arrived in Rome late Tuesday.

The two walked off a plane at Ciampino Airport in Rome, where they faced the glare of camera flashes and shouts of "Simona, Simona."

"The kidnapers treated us well, and they even apologized at the end," Torretta said.

Friends and colleagues unveiled a huge peace flag outside the Rome office of Bridge to Baghdad -- the humanitarian organization the women worked for -- and handed out flowers to passers-by.

The release came less than a week after an Islamic Web site claimed the women had been killed.

Torretta and Pari were taken hostage when their office in Baghdad was raided by insurgents on September 7, police said. They were released with two of their Iraqi colleagues, but details of the release remained sketchy.

Italian authorities disputed reports that a ransom was paid for their release, and Italian intelligence officials said there had been intensive negotiations through mediators. Those sources also indicated that "some money" may have changed hands.

Gustavo Selvo, the head of an Italian parliamentary foreign affairs commission, told reporters he believed a ransom of about \$1 million was paid -- despite government denials.

Selvo, a member of the National Alliance, a partner in Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's conservative government, told France's RTL radio: "The lives of the girls was the most important thing.

"In principle, we shouldn't give in to blackmail but this time we had to, although it's a dangerous path to take because, obviously, it could encourage others to take hostages, either for political reasons or for criminal reasons."

Berlusconi denied any ransom was paid, but most Italians who talked to CNN on the streets were not concerned -- and in fact said they believed there was a ransom paid.

"Whatever politics there might be behind this, let's put it behind us," one man said.

A front-page editorial in the Rome daily La Repubblica said a "ransom was paid and that is nothing to be ashamed of." Another paper, Il Messaggero, said as much as \$20 million could have been paid.

"Finally, a moment of joy," Berlusconi said Tuesday night. "This has been a terrible story, an anxious time for all the country -- all fathers, mothers of Italian daughters -- but it has concluded in a totally positive way."

The humanitarian group that the two women worked for began operating in Iraq at the end of the first Gulf War in 1991 with the goal of lifting the U.N. embargo against Iraq.

Torretta had been in Iraq for at least a year and Pari arrived just a few months ago. Both worked on a UNICEF-linked project to help rebuild schools.

'New era of understanding'

The release of the two Italians raised hopes in Britain for the release of kidnapped engineer Kenneth Bigley, 62, who was shown in a video on Wednesday pleading for his life. ([Full story](#))

"We are all heartened by this," his brother Paul Bigley was quoted as saying Wednesday by The Times newspaper. "I am overjoyed for their families."

Meanwhile, kidnapers of two French journalists in a statement have praised France's "positive steps toward the Iraqi people," a sign that the hostage-takers may be softening their position.

In an e-mailed statement also posted on a discussion board of the Islamic Army in Iraq, the group said it hoped "this is a beginning for a new era of understanding our issues and respect of our constants."

The statement did not refer to the French captives, journalists Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot.

Meanwhile, an Egyptian telecommunications company said four of six employees taken hostage in Iraq last week were released unharmed Tuesday. Orascom Telecom Holding said two of its engineers remain in captivity.

Since April, militant groups in Iraq have seized more than 100 foreign hostages. Most have been released, but about 30 have been killed.

At least seven Italians have been kidnapped in recent months in Iraq and two of them subsequently killed, including journalist Enzo Baldoni.

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