

# Peace activists freed from captivity in Iraq

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**By Robert Marus**

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BAGHDAD (ABP)—Three Christian peace activists held hostage in Iraq since November were freed from captivity.

Christian Peacemaker Teams learned early March 23 that British Baptist Norman Kember, 74; and Canadians James Loney, 41, and Harmeet Singh Sooden, 32, were free.

A previously unknown radical Islamic group calling itself the Swords of Righteousness abducted them nearly four months earlier in Baghdad.

Their release came about two weeks after Iraqi officials found the body of their 54-year-old American colleague, Tom Fox, who was abducted with them. He had been shot to death and—according to some reports—tortured.

The hostages' liberation reportedly was the work of troops from the multinational coalition in Iraq, working on a tip from an Iraqi detained earlier. The Chicago Tribune reported troops found the hostages left

bound, without any captors guarding them.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw appeared on television news broadcasts the morning of March 23, saying the operation was the result of months of careful planning. He told reporters that the men were all in “reasonable” condition, although the two Canadians had to be hospitalized.

Officials from Christian Peacemaker Teams, which has headquarters in both Chicago and Toronto, released a statement of joy tempered by continued sorrow over Fox. “Together we have endured uncertainty, hope, fear, grief and now joy during the four months since they were abducted in Baghdad,” the statement said. “We had longed for the day when all four men would be released together. Our gladness today is made bittersweet by the fact that Tom is not alive to join in the celebration; however, we are confident that his spirit is very much present in each reunion.”

The activists’ kidnappers had demanded the release of all Iraqis detained by United States and British forces and Iraqi police in exchange for the lives of the four hostages. They allowed two deadlines to pass, however, without any word of the quartet’s fate.

Fox and the other activists opposed the U.S.-led war in Iraq, as well as the detainment of Iraqi prisoners who have not been formally charged with crimes. Members of Christian Peacemaker Teams refuse to travel with bodyguards—virtually unheard of for Westerners moving about in unsecured portions of Iraq.

The Swords of Righteousness had accused the hostages of being spies for the U.S. and British governments, which led the multinational coalition that overthrew Iraq’s former government under dictator Saddam Hussein. In the weeks following the kidnapping, Christian Peacemaker Teams waged an aggressive publicity campaign to try to convince the quartet’s captors to release them.

Christian Peacemaker Teams' statement called again for an end to the war, the release of Iraqi prisoners and forgiveness for the captors.

"Harmeet, Jim and Norman and Tom were in Iraq to learn of the struggles facing the people in that country. They went, motivated by a passion for justice and peace to live out a nonviolent alternative in a nation wracked by armed conflict," the statement said. "They knew that their only protection was in the power of the love of God and of their Iraqi and international co-workers. We believe that the illegal occupation of Iraq by multinational forces is the root cause of the insecurity, which led to this kidnapping and so much pain and suffering in Iraq. The occupation must end.

"Today, in the face of this joyful news, our faith compels us to love our enemies even when they have committed acts which caused great hardship to our friends and sorrow to their families. In the spirit of the prophetic nonviolence that motivated Jim, Norman, Harmeet and Tom to go to Iraq, we refuse to yield to a spirit of vengeance."

The director of a Baptist peacemakers group with which Kember is affiliated welcomed the news, and also thanked the many moderate Muslims around the world who condemned the kidnappings.

"We are mindful also of the courageous witness of our Muslim sisters and brothers around the globe—in Iraq, Palestine, Canada and the U.S., Europe, and many other places; these are ones who joined us in prayer and called for their safe release, and testified to the power of our friends' Christian mission for peace in Iraq," said Gary Percesepe of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

"We trust that these seeds of cooperation and good will continue to take root in our respective cultures."

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