

Answer to Prayer: Armed Rebels Release Franklin Graham's Aid Workers

Eight local staff with a U.S. aid group in South Sudan were released safely on Tuesday after being detained by armed men, the agency said, calming fears that such workers could become a new target in the famine-hit nation's civil war.

"Samaritan's Purse is thankful to God for the safe release of our South Sudanese national staff, who had been detained by armed personnel in the Mayendit area of South Sudan. They were all released Tuesday afternoon," the statement from the U.S. aid group said.

"There was no ransom request," added the statement from a group which describes itself as an evangelical Christian organization.

The South Sudan military said on Monday that the aid workers, who were all from the Mayendit area, about 420 miles (680 km) northeast of the capital of Juba, had been kidnapped by rebels.

But on Tuesday, the rebels dismissed the allegation and said they had merely offered civilians protection when fighting began.

"These aid workers are supporting the community and these communities are in liberated areas. So, how should we even abduct someone who supports you? It is unreasonable to do that. It is just a matter of branding us as bad people," deputy rebel spokesman Lam Paul Gabriel told Reuters.

Oil-rich South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, has been mired in civil war since President Salva Kiir, an ethnic

Dinka, sacked his deputy Riek Machar, a Nuer, in 2013.

The fighting has forced 3 million people to flee their homes, split much of the country along ethnic lines and paralyzed agriculture, prompting the U.N. to declare last month that parts of the country are suffering from famine. {eo}

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