

Christians and 'Infidels' Targets of Algerian Terrorists

Islamist gunmen who seized hundreds of gas plant workers in the Sahara told Algerian staff they would not harm Muslims but would kill Western hostages they called "Christians and infidels," a local man who escaped said on Thursday.

In a rare eyewitness account of Wednesday's dawn raid deep in the desert, a local man employed at the facility told Reuters the militants appeared to have good inside knowledge of the layout of the complex and used the language of radical Islam.

"The terrorists told us at the very start that they would not hurt Muslims but were only interested in the Christians and infidels," Abdelkader, 53, said by telephone from his home in the nearby town of In Amenas. "We will kill them, they said."

His voice choking with emotion—"I'm a lucky man," he said over the sound of children playing and a television relaying the latest news—Abdelkader described how he managed to escape along with many of the hundreds of Algerians initially detained.

He asked that his family name be withheld.

"I am still choked, and stressed," he said, adding that he feared many of his foreign colleagues may have died. "The terrorists seemed to know the base very well," he said, "Moving around, showing that they knew where they were going."

The kidnappers said they were retaliating for last week's French offensive in neighboring Mali, and demanded that Paris call off the operation and that Algeria withdraw cooperation.

Security experts said, however, that the raid appeared to have

been planned well in advance—although the decision to launch it now may have been influenced by events in Mali.

An Algerian military operation to end the siege appeared to be continuing late on Thursday. Twenty-five foreign hostages had escaped and six were killed, Algerian sources said. On Wednesday, the militants said they held 41 Westerners, including Americans, Japanese and Europeans of various nationalities.

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