

Did the U.S. Government Betray Missionary Held Hostage in Niger for 6 Years?

A U.S. missionary who was held hostage by Islamic extremists for six years in Niger says he feels betrayed by American government and the FBI, whom he says misled his wife about working to release him.

Jeff Woodke, a Christian aid worker from McKinleyville, California, was kidnapped from his home in Abalak, northern Niger in October 2016 and released from captivity in March of this year. His wife, Els, told The Associated Press that the family believes FBI officials withheld information and lied to them about the scope of demands from the kidnappers.

Jeff Woodke says his time in captivity was “hell.”

“I think the hardest part was knowing that my family, if they were alive, they were suffering too,” Woodke said.

Woodke, who worked with the U.S. non-profit Youth With a Mission, said he was placed in chains, subjected to beatings and pressured to convert to Islam during those six years.

The Woodkes say that U.S. officials poorly communicated with them on the status of negotiations and offered little help to raise money for a ransom. Els Woodke was especially frustrated during a Zoom call with Secretary of State Antony Blinken a couple of months prior to her husband’s release.

“I said, if it was you that had been kidnapped, you would be free in a week because your wife is free to take your money and buy you free,” the AP reported she told Blinken. “So, because you are rich, you can pay the ransom. But a poor person is never able to do that.”

The Daily Wire reported that the U.S. government does not pay ransom to kidnappers, but allows the families of hostages to raise money for a ransom. A private investigator Els Woodke had been working with learned that the FBI misled Woodke about how much the terrorists were asking for. They learned after Jeff's release that the kidnappers were asking for \$3.3 million along with the release of prisoners from Western African jails.

Negotiators on behalf of the U.S. government prompted the kidnappers to drop their demand for a prisoner release, but also raised the ransom price to \$6.5 million, making the chances for Els Woodke to raise the money even slimmer.

The FBI told the AP that it had worked "tirelessly" to free Woodke from his captors, but would not comment on the Woodke's accusations.

Jeff Woodke wasn't buying it.

"We're not things, we're not bargaining chips, we're not cases—we're people," Woodke told the AP. "We don't want to sit under trees in chains. Our families don't want to have to suffer." {eo}

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