

French Priest Kidnapped in Cameroon Set Free

A French Catholic priest kidnapped in northern Cameroon last month was released on Monday and said he had spent the weeks pacing his tent prison, torn by a mixture of boredom and anger.

France said it had not paid any ransom for his release.

The Nov. 13 kidnapping of Georges Vandenbeusch, 42, was one of a series of attacks on French targets in Africa since France launched a military intervention in Mali in January to oust al-Qaida Islamists who had forged links with Boko Haram militants.

He had chosen to remain as a priest in northern Cameroon, a zone where Nigerian Islamist sect **Boko Haram** is known to operate, despite the security threat.

Arriving at the airport in Yaounde, Vandenbeusch, looking tired and dressed all in white, expressed thanks to authorities in Cameroon, France and Nigeria for his release.

"I am in good health and so grateful to those who worked for my release," he told reporters before being taken to the French embassy. "(It was) terribly boring. I spent seven weeks with nothing to do, pacing in circles in my tent under a tree without a book to read or a person to talk to."

He said he had felt sadness and anger at his kidnapping because he is very attached to inhabitants of the parish where he works, Christians, animists and Muslims alike.

"I was quite sure that many people were thinking of me, were working and praying for everything to turn out alright," he said.

French President Francois Hollande thanked Cameroonian and Nigerian authorities for their work in securing his release and highlighted the “personal involvement” of Cameroonian President Paul Biya, according to the brief statement.

Nigerian authorities did not respond to requests for comment. Six French nationals continue to be held hostage in Mali and Syria.

The statement said Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius would travel imminently to the Cameroonian capital Yaounde to bring Vandenbeusch back to France.

Asked by RTL radio whether France had paid a ransom, Fabius said that was against its principles, adding: “There are always discussions which are complex and long and which, as it turns out, are not financial discussions.”

Hollande has said Paris ended a previous policy of paying ransoms for hostages. But suspicion that it still does so, despite repeated official denials, has been a source of tension with governments such as the United States.

Boko Haram kidnapped a French family of seven on holiday in northern Cameroon in February and released them in April.

A confidential Nigerian government report seen by Reuters said Boko Haram was given the equivalent of \$ million by French and Cameroonian negotiators. Hollande denied at the time that a ransom had been paid.

Editing by Natalie Huet and James Regan

© 2013 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.