

Kidnapped Syrian Bishops Still Missing, Say Church Sources

Two Syrian bishops kidnapped by gunmen on Monday are still missing, church sources in Damascus and Aleppo said on Wednesday, contradicting a report that the men had been freed.

A source at the Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo said the bishops had not been released and he was unaware of any contact with their abductors. At the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus, a source also said there was no indication they had been freed.

Greek Orthodox archbishop Paul Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim were seized near the northern commercial and industrial hub of Aleppo, which is contested by rebels and forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.

Authorities blamed the abduction on a “terrorist group”, the label they usually give to anti-Assad rebels, but opposition fighters in the province denied they had kidnapped the two and said they were working for their release and trying to find out who had taken them.

The bishops were the most senior church figures caught up in the fight between Assad’s forces and rebels trying to end four decades of family rule by Assad and his late father.

The conflict has killed more than 70,000 people and frightened minority groups as the mainly Sunni Muslim rebels gain ground in northern Syria, where Salafi and jihadi groups, including the al Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front, have emerged as among the most formidable insurgent formations.

Reporting by Dominic Evans; Editing by Alistair Lyon

© 2013 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.