

Radical Islamists Free Captive Missionary

Islamist militants have freed a former Catholic missionary priest on a remote Philippine southern island, six months after the Italian man was abducted from his pizza parlor, a military spokesman said on Friday.

Brigadier-General Restituto Padilla told reporters Rolando del Torchio, 53, was found by police at a seaport on Jolo island, a stronghold of the small but violent Islamist militant group Abu Sayyaf.

"A team of police officers found him about to board a ferry and decided to bring the kidnap victim to a military trauma center," Padilla said. "He will be taken care of by a military doctor due to poor health."

He said it was not immediately known if a ransom was paid for del Torchio's safe release. Some local media said 29 million peso (\$630,000) was paid.

The Italian, who previously served at the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, was seized on Oct. 7 by four gunmen, posing as customers, at Ur Choice Bistro Cafe, a pizza parlor he owned in Dipolog City on mainland Mindanao island.

Army and police units are on alert on Jolo where security forces are pursuing al Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf, a group known for kidnapping, beheading, bombing and extortion in the southern Philippines.

Last month the Islamist militants seized 10 Indonesian crew of a Taiwanese tugboat near Jolo and demanded 50 million peso ransom. A week later, four Malaysian crew of another tugboat were kidnapped near Sabah in eastern Malaysia.

The Abu Sayyaf was holding two Canadian men, a Norwegian man, a Dutch man and a Japanese man in the jungles of Jolo. They threatened to execute the Canadians and Norwegian on Friday if \$85 million is not paid after a month-long deadline. {eo}

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