

Botched US rescue operation in Yemen ends in deaths of two hostages

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US Special Forces carried out a raid just after midnight Saturday on a compound in the southern Yemeni province of Shabwah where Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was holding two hostages. The raid resulted in the deaths of at least 16 people, including civilians, militants as well as the hostages, British-American photojournalist Luke Somers and South African teacher Pierre Korkie.

US President Barack Obama released a statement after the botched raid in which he said he authorized the rescue attempt because Somers' life was in "imminent danger." AQAP released a video last Wednesday in which they threatened to kill Somers within 72 hours if unspecified demands were not met.

By all accounts, the 33-year-old Somers was a talented and sensitive photographer who, as a freelance photojournalist, had many of his images published by BBC, Al Jazeera and other news outlets. He relocated to Yemen in early 2011 to teach English and ended up documenting images from many of the Arab Spring protests in the capital of Sanaa.

Speaking to the media, Somers' stepmother Penny Bearman, who lives in Britain, expressed the outrage of his family at the botched raid. She said that the family was upset "because if there had not been a rescue attempt he would still be alive." Somers' family was still holding out hope, as previous threats on his life had not been carried out. Additionally, Bearman said that the family had been "kept in the dark" about last weekend's raid as well as the failed rescue attempt in November.

Korkie, on the other hand, was due to be released by the militants on Saturday. His release had been negotiated by the South African charity Gift of the Givers, which had previously succeeded in freeing his wife Yolande from the Al Qaeda militants in January.

A convoy of cars was preparing to leave the southern port city of Aden to retrieve him when the news of his death was confirmed.

The Korkies had been working for Gift of the Givers in Yemen when they were kidnapped last year by AQAP in the southeastern city of Taiz. Their employer was negotiating independently with the AQAP militants after the South African government refused to mediate on their behalf.

Negotiations through intermediaries had succeeded in reducing the demanded ransom from \$3 million to \$200,000. Their efforts appeared to suffer a setback in November when a group of tribal elders who were acting as mediators were killed in November in a US drone strike after meeting with AQAP representatives.

Imtiaz Sooliman, director of the charity, announced the outcome of the raid in a statement on the charity's web site. "The psychological and emotional devastation to Yolande and her family will be compounded by the knowledge that Pierre was to be released by Al Qaeda tomorrow," the statement read. He later condemned the raid as the event that had "destroyed everything."

Speaking to the *New York Times*, Sooliman said that he had "spent hours on the phone with Yolande to try to calm her down," the night before Korkie's planned release. "I told her, 'I'll call you the moment Pierre is in our hands,'" he said. "She went to sleep with that good feeling in her heart."

US Ambassador to South Africa Patrick Gaspard told the Associated Press on Monday that US officials were "unaware of ongoing negotiations that had any resolution" between AQAP and Gift of the Givers. Gaspard also denied that the US had any knowledge of Korkie being held with Somers, though they suspected that other hostages were in the compound.

Gaspard's comments were contradicted by South

African government spokesman Nelson Kegwete, who told reporters, “We recognize that this was an attempt to secure the freedom of Mr. Korkie and the hostages who had been kept in captivity.”

Surveillance drones, spy satellites and eavesdropping technology were all deployed by the American government to pinpoint Somers’ location, providing with them a good sense of who else was in the compound prior to the raid.

According to accounts given to the *Wall Street Journal* by anonymous Obama administration and US military officials, the commando team was approximately 100 yards from the compound when their presence was given away by a barking dog. A firefight subsequently broke out between the militants in the compound and the team of 40 Navy Seals.

An individual was seen running into the compound where Somers and Korkie were being held in the midst of the fight, according to accounts from US officials. When the commandos found the two hostages they were both bleeding out from gunshot wounds. Medical teams on waiting Osprey helicopters reportedly made attempts to save the lives of both men, but both died on the operating table.

The entire raid lasted approximately 30 minutes and there were no reported injuries or fatalities among the American commandos. Six suspected AQAP militants were reportedly killed in the firefight in addition to eight civilians, including a 70-year-old man.

This was the second attempt in less than two weeks by US Navy Seals to rescue Somers from his captors, who had snatched him off the streets of Sanaa in September 2013. A November 26 attack by US Special Forces and Yemeni troops on a cave in northern Yemen resulted in the freeing of eight captives. Somers had been moved to another location after the militants were tipped off about the raid.



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