

# US blocked negotiations for hostages killed in Yemen raid

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According to sources in Yemen cited by the *Intercept*, the United States government actively worked to block attempts by mediators to negotiate the release of British-American Luke Somers by paying a ransom to his captors, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Both Somers and Pierre Korkie, a South African teacher taken hostage in Yemen in May 2013, were killed by their captors during a US special operations raid last week.

Penny Bearman, Somers' stepmother, told the *Intercept* that his family was advised by the FBI not to wage a public campaign for his release and there were told "very little" by the US government during his time in captivity. "My instinct was that we could have raised a ransom and perhaps worked with another country, but we didn't know what was going on," she said. "My feeling now is that all the strategies [for freeing hostages] seem to be really egocentric around individual government's policies."

In an interview with the BBC Bearman, stated that negotiations to ransom her stepson had been underway since at least April of this year, but the family did not learn of the talks until after his death.

After initial reports of Somers' kidnapping in Sanaa in September last year, the State Department organized a media blackout concerning the case, meaning that the family heard little to nothing about Somers' whereabouts or his wellbeing.

Korkie had been taken hostage along with his wife Yolande, who was released in January after successful negotiations undertaken by their employer, Gift of the Givers.

According to anonymous sources affiliated with AQAP interviewed by the *Intercept*, negotiations were conducted between the Al Qaeda affiliate and mediators for the release of both Somers and Korkie.

Negotiators had got so far as to agree on a price for the two hostages that would be paid by a third party. However, negotiations for their release broke down in April of this year when the US government blocked the talks.

The US government also acted in other ways to block ransom talks. In November, a US drone strike killed a group of tribal leaders who had been working as mediators for Gift of the Givers in its own effort to free Korkie.

On November 26, a raid was launched by US Navy Seals and Yemeni Special Forces in an attempt to free Somers and a group of other hostages. Even though the raid successfully freed eight hostages, Somers had already been moved to a new location ahead of the raid.

After the November raid, which killed seven of their members, AQAP released a video in which they threatened to execute Somers if unspecified demands were not met or if another rescue attempt was made.

The AQAP affiliated source claimed that prior to the raid in November Somers' life was never in immediate danger from his captors, and even after the raid they had not yet decided to kill Somers. While the Al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen is known for kidnappings it has never before killed one of its hostages, instead extracting large ransom payments.

According to a statement from President Obama, the US government decided to launch another raid as it believed that Somers' life was in "imminent danger."

On December 6 US Navy Seals launched a raid on the village in southern Yemen where the men were being held. According to accounts given by anonymous government officials, Somers and Korkie were shot by an AQAP militant in the midst of a fire fight with Navy Seals and died as they were being operated on by army medics.

US officials claim that they did not know that Korkie was being held with Somers, or that he was due to be released from captivity on the day of the raid. These claims have been brought into question by statements made by members of the South African government.

Speaking to the *Mail* and *Guardian*, an anonymous source inside South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation denounced the US for its recklessness in carrying out the hostage rescue raid. The source also rejected the notion that the US did not know about the negotiations to free Korkie. "They knew very well ... their intelligence is very good. They just prefer cowboy tactics. Period."



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