

Aid worker hostages released by al-Qa'ida after nine months in Sahara

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Two Spanish aid workers held by al-Qa'ida's North African wing were freed yesterday, ending a kidnapping in the Sahara Desert lasting nearly nine months.

Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) said it seized Albert Vilalta and Roque Pascual while they were travelling through Mauritania with a relief aid convoy last November, the latest in a string of abductions claimed by the group.

"They are safe and sound after 268 days in the hands of their kidnappers and [after 268 days] of the Spanish government's concern and efforts to obtain their release," Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero told a news conference.



He said relatives were travelling with a government representative to meet the two men, who were working with the Barcelona-Accio Solidario aid group when they were seized.

They were due to arrive in Barcelona last night after being transferred by helicopter to the airport in Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou.

The release appeared to be linked to Mauritania's repatriation to Mali earlier this month of a militant convicted of the kidnapping of the two Spaniards, along with a third who was freed in March, a European security analyst said.

"There was a swap, though it is unclear if there was also a ransom paid," said the analyst.