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Al Qaeda releases audio message from kidnapped Italian

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Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has released an audio message addressed to the Italian government from one of two Italians kidnapped in Mauritania in December, US monitoring agency SITE reported on Sunday.

AFP- Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has released an audio message from one of two Italians kidnapped in Mauritania in December, US-monitoring agency SITE said on Sunday.

The message is a plea from Italian captive Sergio Cicala and is entitled "Call from the kidnapped Italian to the Berlusconi government," said SITE, which monitors Islamist websites.

It said Cicala's statement, slightly over a minute long, is delivered in Italian and is dated February 24.

Cicala, 65, and his Burkina Faso-born wife Philomene Kabore, 39, were abducted in southeast Mauritania on December 18 by AQIM.

SITE said that on February 5, AQIM issued a message demanding the release of prisoners in exchange for the captives, giving the Italian government 25 days to comply.

In a brief statement from AQIM accompanying Cicala's message, the group called on Italians to pressure their government to meet the demands of the kidnappers.

"We reaffirm our call to the families of the kidnapped and to Italian public opinion: If you desire the safety of the captives, then apply pressure on your offending government and ask it to respond to the legitimate demands of the mujahedeen."