

Hostages' families had paid kidnapper

Deal to release pair 'was very close after £4m ransom demand agreed'

The Mail on Sunday 11 Mar 2012 By Nick Pisa IN GATTINARA and Christopher Leake Additional reporting: James Millbank

THE families of British construction worker Chris Mcmanus and an Italian hostage had paid £1million to secure their release, it was claimed last night.

Reports in the Italian media claimed the money was a down payment on a £4million ransom demand by terrorists in Nigeria who executed Mr Mcmanus and colleague Franco Lamolinara during a daring raid by the Special Boat Service.



There was no indication as to whether Mr Mcmanus's family had paid the money themselves

The family of Mr Lamolinara, 4, were said to have been 'quietly optimistic' that he would be home by Easter after being briefed by Italian officials last week.

There were also said to be high hopes his colleague Mr Mcmanus, 28, from Oldham, Greater Manchester, would be freed, too.

had paid kidnappers £1m

agreed'

orting: James Millbank

According to Italian reports, members of engineer Mr Lamolinara's family were in Rome last Tuesday to view a video that had found its way into the hands of intelligence chiefs. The tape showed the men, who were kidnapped at gunpoint from their Nigerian apartment last May.

Two days later, an unsuccessful mission by the SBS and Nigerian special forces resulted in both hostages being shot dead by their captors after a gun battle at the



kidnap gang's hideout.

Senior British Government sources said last night that there

'They hoped he would be home by Easter'

Had been no 'coherent' ransom demand from the terrorists.

Turin-based La Stampa newspaper reported that negotiations had been taking place for the release of the Italian hostage through contacts in the west African state of Mauritania. Another report last night said that Mauritanian businessman and politician Moustafa Ould Imam Chafi had been at the centre of the negotiations.

Chafi, 52, helped secure the release of 28 Spaniards kidnapped in Mauritania in 2010, and the release of Italian tourist Sergio Cicala and his wife last year.

He has been banned from Mauritania, where he is wanted for allegedly supporting terrorism.

Whitehall has been embroiled in diplomatic row with the Italian government, which accused Britain of failing to tell them in advance of the rescue mission on the heavily fortified terrorist-held compound on the outskirts of Sokoto, northern Nigeria.

Italian news reports said an autopsy on Mr Lamolinara, whose

body was flown back to Rome yesterday, found that he was shot in the head three or four times at close range.

British officials have insisted that David Cameron had no choice but to order the rescue bid on Thursday morning after intelligence reports revealed that Mr Mcmanus and Mr Lamolinara were about to be moved, or possibly executed by their hard-line captors from the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic group Boko Haram.

But a friend of the dead Italian's family, local politician Carlo Riva Vercoletti, told The Mail on Sunday: 'Franco's wife Anna was hopeful this would soon be over. They had maintained a dignified silence at the request of the Ital-



FAILED RESCUE: Chris Mcmanus had been held in Nigeria since last May

ian Foreign Ministry because they were told things were in hand.

'They were convinced Franco was on his way home but instead it has ended in the most tragic of

ways. They were in Rome a few days ago to see a video of Franco. It had given them more hope that he and his British colleague would soon be free, but 48 hours later that hope was extinguished.'

A source close to the Lamolinara family, from Gattinara near Vercelli, North-west Italy, said: 'The understanding was that a deal with the kidnappers was at a very advanced stage and Franco would be home by Easter.'

The previously undisclosed talks were said to have been revealed by an Al Qaeda defector, who claimed negotiations had been held with officials from Britain and Italy through middlemen.

The Mauritanian news agency ANI said the former Al Qaeda operative was close to the kidnappers. He claimed the gang had contacted family members of the men to secure payment and ensure their safe release. Unlike Britain, Italy has a policy of negotiating with terrorists holding hostages.

According to the former Al Qaeda informant, negotiations were at an 'advanced stage' and the kidnappers had offered to reduce the ransom for the two men. The unnamed man said the group was not interested in the release of jailed comrades but 'just the cash'.

He claimed an initial payment of £1million had been made after a 'long and protracted series of

'A difficult decision – but the right one'

Talks'. The balance of the £4million had been due to change hands shortly after which the hostages would have been released. The body of Mr Mcmanus was flown home from Lagos to Heathrow yesterday.

A Government source said last night: 'There was never a coherent demand for money for the release of these hostages. We needed to act quickly once it became clear there was an imminent threat to life. It was a difficult decision, but the right one.'



EXECUTED: Bullet holes in the kidnappers' compound in Sokoto, left, and Franco Lamolinara, above

A Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman in Rome said: 'We don't pay ransoms.'

Yesterday, more than 10,000

Oldham football fans stood in silent tribute to Mr Mcmanus before the team he supported played Yeovil.

WE MAY never know the whole story of the Nigerian kidnapping and its unhappy outcome. But before we are too harsh on the Government, we should consider just how difficult it is to handle such affairs.

Special Forces soldiers, though wonderfully brave and competent, cannot work miracles and will sometimes fail, especially when operating on foreign territory.

Families of hostages, trapped in an awful grief, cannot be blamed for seeking to pay ransoms. But they cannot be encouraged to do

so either, for this will just mean more kidnappings in future.

Those who are ready to go to work in risky places should be applauded for their enterprise and courage.

But they must also recognise that the danger is real, that paying ransom is a morally tricky act – and that rescue will not always be possible.



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