

http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jVi8XxdSpcj9v0kYOum_jOOTMQn

Go

JUL AUG SEP

27

2009 2010 2011

About this capture

1 capture

27 Aug 2010

Hosted by Google™

Search News

Kidnapper of Spanish hostages says it was just business

(AFP) – 2 days ago

BAMAKO — For Omar the Sahrawi, a convicted mercenary released in exchange for two Spanish hostages in North Africa this week, kidnappings and dealings with Al-Qaeda are all in a day's work.

The 52-year-old who masterminded the original kidnap of the Spaniards in November last year says he is not even a member of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the regional offshoot of Osama bin Laden's group.

"I have nothing to do with Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb. Me, I do business, and if you sell something to someone who is from AQIM, it does not mean that you are from AQIM. I am a businessman," said on Tuesday in a brief telephone interview with AFP.

But his desert expertise and links with local tribes made him a key asset to AQIM, who demanded his release from a 12-year prison sentence in Mauritania in exchange for Monday's freeing of Roque Pascual, 50, and Albert Vilalta, 35, and his return to Mali, his homeland.

Omar Sid Ahmed Ould Hamma -- his real name -- was paid by AQIM for kidnapping Pascual, Vilalta, and 39-year-old Alicia Gamez in Mauritania nine months ago and then taking them to Mali.

Gamez, the only female among the group, was released in March and the remaining hostages were freed this week after Hamma was extradited back to Mali on August 16 and subsequently freed.

While unconfirmed figures in the Sahelian media said he received two million euros for kidnapping the Spaniards, Mauritanian sources said he was paid 15,000 euros for handing them to AQIM's Algerian unit leader, Mokhtar Belmokhtar.

During his trial the man with a round face, short white hair, neatly trimmed beard and dark complexion appeared upset as he pleaded not guilty, arguing that he was tortured while in custody.

Now he is back in Mali.

"I came to Mali free," he said, speaking in Hassania, an Arabic dialect, in remarks that were translated by one of his cousins, Mohammed.

On the day he left Nouakchott "three of them (Mauritanian officials) accompanied me by plane. They told me that the case was over."

In his homeland Mali he is registered "as a cigarette smuggler and transporter of illegal immigrants," according to a Malian security source.

"As a trader, one must also understand this is someone who will do anything for money," the source said.

Hamma was born into a family originally from Mauritania, and is married to a woman from the western Sahara whom he met while conducting business in Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria.

That gave him his nickname "Assahraoui" (The Sahrawi).

His origins, his marriage and his relationships with the tribes of the Sahel countries accumulated over countless voyages in this vast area have given him experience that is invaluable to AQIM, which operates on the borders of Algeria, Mauritania, Niger and Mali.

AQIM leader Belmokhtar made Hamma's release one of the key requirements for the release of the Spanish hostages, along with a hefty ransom which Malian mediators say was eight million euros (10 million dollars).

Copyright © 2010 AFP. All rights reserved. More »

Related articles

Spanish hostages freed in Mali return home through Burkina Faso
People's Daily Online - 3 days ago

US Cluster

Al-Qaeda frees Spanish aid staff



Spanish aid workers Roque Pascual (L) and Albert Vilalta (C) arrive at Barcelona airport on August 23

http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jVi8XxdSpcj9v0kYOum_jOOTMQnA

Go

JUL AUG SEP

◀ 27 ▶

2009 2010 2011



▼ About this capture

[1 capture](#)

27 Aug 2010

ago

[More coverage \(1\) »](#)archive.org

Add News to your Google Homepage

©2010 Google - [About Google News](#) - [Blog](#) - [Help Center](#) - [Help for Publishers](#) - [Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Policy](#) - [Google Home](#)