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WORLD

Shock over killing of Iraq hostage

Thursday, April 15, 2004 Posted: 1317 GMT (2117 HKT)

(CNN) -- The first confirmed killing of a hostage by Iraqi militants has provoked shock and disbelief in Italy as fears grow about the safety of foreign nationals working with the U.S.-led coalition.

Meanwhile Thursday, three Japanese civilians taken hostage last week in Iraq were released, according to the Arab television network Al Jazeera.

Their captors had demanded Japan withdraw its 550 ground troops who are performing humanitarian missions in Iraq, part of an eventual deployment of 1,100 non-combat troops.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi on Thursday vowed that the videotaped execution of Fabrizio Quattrocchi would not affect his commitment to keep troops in Iraq.

The militants who killed Quattrocchi threatened to execute three other Italian hostages who worked with him for a U.S. private security firm unless Italy withdrew its 2,700 troops from Iraq.

"They have broken a life, they have not cracked our values and our desire for the peace," Berlusconi said in a statement.

The prime minister's office said a top diplomat would be sent on an urgent mission to Iraq to try to secure the release of the remaining Italians.

The killing united Italy -- at least temporarily -- where the majority of the population overwhelmingly opposed the center-right government's support for the U.S.-led war in Iraq.



The four hostages were working in Iraq as private security guards.

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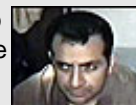
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VIDEO

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Italian diplomat tries to secure release of three surviving hostages. CNN's Alessio Vinci reports. (April 15)



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Eight employees of a Russian company in Iraq released unharmed.



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"We must not recall our troops because a band of assassins have demanded it," said Francesco Rutelli, leader of a center-left opposition party.

"The vile blackmail by a band of criminal kidnapers must not be given the dignity of a political response. Italy is and must remain unified and together."

The media also expressed outrage: "Shot in the neck in front of his own grave," said left-wing daily La Repubblica. "Horror in Iraq, one Italian hostage killed," Corriere della Sera said in a headline.

Foreign Minister Franco Frattini first confirmed the execution early Thursday, telling state television that the Italian ambassador to Qatar viewed a portion of the videotaped execution and confirmed that the slain hostage was Quattrocchi.

Al-Jazeera said it received the video of the execution Wednesday from a group claiming to be "The Mujahedeen Brigade." Al-Jazeera said it did not air the video because it was too graphic.

Frattini later described how Quattrocchi was executed. "When the murderers were pointing a pistol at him, this man tried to take off his hood and shouted: 'Now I'm going to show you how an Italian dies'. And they killed him.

"He died a hero," Reuters reported Frattini as saying.

'Common enemy'

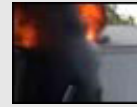
With Iraq tense amid the ongoing insurgent violence, U.S. forces carried out a series of raids Wednesday, killing at least 16 enemy combatants and detaining more than 40 others suspected of anti-coalition activity in Al Anbar Province, the military said.

On Thursday, an Iranian diplomat in Baghdad was shot dead by unknown gunmen, Iranian Embassy officials said.

The diplomat identified as Khalil Naimi, first deputy of the Iranian Embassy in Iraq. He was shot and killed near the embassy in the Salhiya neighborhood of Baghdad.

Also Thursday, Iraqi insurgents distributed a leaflet warning Baghdad residents to stay indoors for the next week, because the group plans to move its insurgency to the Iraqi capital.

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Insurgents have increasingly turned to abductions of foreign civilians in Iraq in an attempt to break the U.S.-led coalition. More than 40 hostages have been taken captive in recent days -- 32 of whom have been released.

But the killing of the Italian man marked the first time a hostage has been confirmed to have been executed. Nine others are believed to remain captive: the three other Italians, an American, three Japanese and two Arabs.

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Two American soldiers remain missing, along with six American contractors. It is unclear if they were kidnapped.

A freed French hostage said Thursday an interconnected group of Saddam loyalists, Islamic Party members and followers of a radical Shiite cleric were behind a spate of kidnappings in Iraq. ([Full story](#))

"They are all interconnected, they all know each other," French journalist Alexandre Jourdanov told CNN.

"They don't share the same views but they have one common enemy and it's the American occupation."

Jourdanov, who works for French TV network Capa, was taken hostage Sunday and released four days later. He said he was shuffled between the various insurgency groups, blindfolded, to 10 different locations.

He said he feared he would die. "They would take you outside and make you believe they were going to kill you. Or they would ... take you to the bathroom and watch you go to the bathroom with three guys with Kalashnikovs. They would ask you strange questions about the Bible, or they would ask sexual questions."

Fears prompt pullout

Meanwhile Thursday, Al-Jazeera on Thursday showed footage of the three Japanese hostages - identified as volunteer workers Noriaki Imai, 18, Nahoko Takato, 34, and photojournalist Soichiro Koriyama, 32 in Baghdad.

They were released in good health to the Muslim Clerics Association in Baghdad, Al-Jazeera reported on Thursday. ([Full story](#))

And a Russian plane flew to Iraq to begin the evacuation of hundreds of Russian workers in Iraq after a spate of kidnappings. [Russia airlift](#)

An Il-62 passenger jet from the Russian Emergency Situations Ministry took off from a base near Moscow early Thursday to start the two-day evacuation.

The move comes after three Russians and five Ukrainians were abducted in Iraq on Monday but released the following day.

Coalition partner, the Philippines, said it was considering removing its contingent of 60 troops.

Ricardo L. Saludo, Philippines presidential spokesman, said in a statement "the decision on whether or not to withdraw our peacekeeping forces will depend on the

security situation in Iraq in the days to come."

He said while the government is dedicated to helping Iraq rebuild, "the safety of our peacekeeping forces in Iraq is still our utmost concern."

"The government will take all precautionary measures to ensure the safety of our contingent."

-- CNN's Ryan Chilcote, Alessio Vinci, Octavia Nasr, Atika Shubert and Hayat Mongodin contributed to this report.

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