

Italian, Briton killed during rescue operation in Sokoto

Two Europeans – a Briton and an Italian – kidnapped by Boko Haram in May 2011 were killed in Sokoto, Sokoto State on Thursday during a rescue operation by British and Nigerian special forces.

News of the failed rescue attempt was relayed yesterday by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Mr. David Cameron, in a special statement issued from his 10, Downing Street office.

Chris McManus, from the North West of England, and his colleague Franco Lamolinara were working for an Italian construction firm, B Stabilini, in Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State when they were kidnapped by members of the violent Islamic sect, Boko Haram.

THE PUNCH had got a tip late last year that a rescue operation was in the works and that British Special Forces were combing the North for the hostages. The paper then assigned a reporter to do the story.

But the newspaper decided to heed the pleas of a senior government official who pleaded that publishing the story could jeopardise the operations and imperil the lives of the men.

The British Prime Minister said the hostages were murdered by their captors either before the rescue bid or during the operations. *Sky News* reports that a source told its correspondent that the UK and Nigerian forces could not get to McManus and Lamolinara in time.

"It strongly appears that the hostage-takers shot the hostages," the sources said.

Sources told *Sky News* that there were no fatalities on the British and Nigerian forces side, but there were several fatalities among the hostage-takers.

Cameron said the rescue bid was reportedly launched after the UK had received credible information about their whereabouts and that their lives were under increasing threat. He added that the decision to launch the operation was jointly taken by the two countries.

Cameron said, "Since then (May 2011), we have been working closely with the Nigerian authorities to try to find Chris and Franco, and to secure their release.

"The terrorists holding the two hostages made very clear threats to take their lives, including in a video that was posted on the Internet.

"After months of not knowing where they were being held, we received credible information about their location. A window of opportunity arose to secure their release.

"We also had reason to believe that their lives were under imminent and growing danger. Preparations were made to mount an operation to attempt to rescue Chris and Franco.

"Together with the Nigerian Government, today I authorised it to go ahead, with UK support.

"It is with great regret that I have to say that both Chris and Franco have lost their lives.

"We are still awaiting confirmation of the details, but the early indications are clear that both men were murdered by their captors, before they could be rescued."

He added: "Our immediate thoughts must be with Chris and Franco's families, and we offer them our sincerest condolences."

Meanwhile, President Goodluck Jonathan has condemned the killing of the two kidnapped foreigners and revealed that their killers had been captured.

A statement by his Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Dr. Reuben Abati, quoted the President as describing the incident as sad, unfortunate and regrettable.

The President, on behalf of the Nigerian government extended his condolences to the families of the bereaved and the people and governments of Britain and Italy.

He commended the cooperation and understanding of the British and Italian

governments and assured them that the perpetrators, who had all been arrested, would be made to face the full wrath of the law.

Jonathan also promised that the Nigerian government would take every necessary step to continue to protect the lives of foreigners in the country.

In a statement, the McManus family said: "As a family, we are of course devastated by the news of Chris' death which we received earlier today.

"During this ordeal, we have relied heavily on the support of our family and friends which has never waned and has enabled us to get through the most difficult of times.

"We are also aware of the many people who were working to try and have Chris returned to our family, and his girlfriend. We would like to thank all of them for their efforts.

"We knew Chris was in an extremely dangerous situation. However, we knew that everything that could be done was being done."

In August, a Nigerian group believed to be a splinter faction of Boko Haram had announced that it had captured a Briton.

The group, which called itself 'Al Qaeda in the land beyond the Sahel' released a hostage video to a Mauritanian news agency showing a blindfolded and bearded hostage in a red shirt, guarded by three men with Ak-47 rifles and a cutlass.

In the video, the hostage man asked the British government to meet the demands of the group to save his life. However, neither the hostage nor his captors had given details of the demands.

One of the kidnappers said it would be the "last message" issued to Mr. Cameron about the hostage. The speaker said the British government had failed to answer their demands and it was given two weeks to "take the correct decision."