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SWISS RED CROSS HOSTAGE WALKS FREE¹

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Swiss Red Cross hostage Andreas Notter finally walked out of his four-month ordeal on 18 April 2009. Police and Civilian Emergency Forces in *Barangay* (Village) Manilop, Indanan, Sulu² found Notter walking with a cane³ near *Barangay* Katian⁴ around 0530AM. Notter apparently escaped or was abandoned by his Abu Sayyaf captors⁵ when the gunmen tried to break out of a police cordon and was pursued by government troops.⁶



Andreas Notter (Photo Taken from ABS-CBN News)

Notter thanked officials and urged them to rescue Italian Eugenio Vagni⁷--the last of the Red Cross workers seized with Notter and Filipina Mary Jean Lacaba last 15 January 2009 in Jolo, Sulu. The Abu Sayyaf freed Lacaba on 2 April. Notter said he and Vagni were separated on 17 April for an unknown reason. Vagni is reportedly being held by a bigger group led by Albader Parad in nearby Parang town.⁸

Notter's Escape

Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno said the Abu Sayyaf bandits had been moving around the 15-square kilometer cordoned area⁹ prior to Notter's escape. The bandits were being pursued by government troops when they hit the security cordon and left Notter.¹⁰ Two days before Notter's escape, members of the Ulama council--who are negotiating with the bandits--lost contact with the kidnappers. The military had also decided to "reposition" troops, moving 500 meters near the bandits' lair.¹¹ Puno said the repositioning could have forced the bandits to move until troops spotted them.¹² Sulu Gov. Abdusakur Tan said the police called him around 0700H and informed him that they have Notter.¹³ The Swiss national was immediately brought to his home in *Barangay* Asturia in Jolo, Sulu.¹⁴

¹"Swiss Hostage Walks Free," 19 April 2009, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20090419-200132/Swiss-hostage-walks-free>

²"(4th Update) Police rescue ICRC worker Andreas Notter," 18 April 2009, ABS-CBN News, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/04/18/09/police-rescue-icrc-worker-andreas-notter-indanan>

³"1,000 Government Troops Ring Abu Stronghold," 20 April 2009, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20090420-200309/1000-govt-troops-ring-Abu-stronghold>

⁴"(4th Update) Police rescue ICRC worker Andreas Notter," 18 April 2009, ABS-CBN News, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/04/18/09/police-rescue-icrc-worker-andreas-notter-indanan>

⁵Ibid

⁶"Police rescue ICRC worker from Abu Sayyaf in Sulu," 18 April 2009, GMA News, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/157536/Police-rescue-ICRC-worker-from-Abu-Sayyaf-in-Sulu>

⁷"1,000 Government Troops Ring Abu Stronghold," 20 April 2009, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20090420-200309/1000-govt-troops-ring-Abu-stronghold>

⁸"Security tightened in Sulu town after rescue of Red Cross worker," 20 April 2009, GMA News, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/157710/Security-tightened-in-Sulu-town-after-rescue-of-Red-Cross-worker>

⁹"(4th Update) Police rescue ICRC worker Andreas Notter," 18 April 2009, ABS-CBN News, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/04/18/09/police-rescue-icrc-worker-andreas-notter-indanan>

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹Ibid

¹²Ibid

¹³Ibid

¹⁴Ibid

“Released, Not Rescued”

However, Philippine National Red Cross (PNRC) Chairman Sen. Richard Gordon believes that Notter was “released” or “freed” and not rescued, after hearing Notter’s account as relayed to him by the deputy secretary general of the PNRC. ¹⁵ Gordon said Notter recalled he was walking with his Abu Sayyaf “escorts” early morning of 18 April when “one of them would sit down, another would tie a shoelace while others would disappear for other reasons¹⁶” --until government troops found Notter.¹⁷

When asked if ransom was paid for Notter’s release, Gordon refused to comment but insisted the Red Cross does not pay ransom.¹⁸ The Philippine government has sternly maintained its no-ransom policy. It has also asked the Swiss and Italian governments not to give in to the kidnappers’ demands, warning that any payoff would be used by the Abu Sayyaf to buy more weapons.

Remaining Hostage

Meanwhile, the government has deployed more troops to help secure the release of 62-year old Vagni amid concerns for his health.¹⁹ Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro said more than 1,000 Marines, police and armed village guards now surround the kidnappers’ stronghold to exert pressure on them while Muslim clerics tries to negotiate Vagni’s immediate release.



Eugenio Vagni (Photo Taken from GMA News)

The Armed Forces of the Philippines said Vagni’s health condition is a key factor in efforts to free him. However, they said a military rescue remained an option.”²⁰ The Armed Forces also said that the bandits are running out of personnel and ammunition and that the bandits have no other choice but to release its remaining hostage.²¹”

At Least 7,000 Affected Civilians

Meanwhile, at least 7,000 individuals have been displaced by the ongoing hostage crisis in Sulu.²² Three Marines have also been killed and 19 others were wounded when government security forces fought Abu Sayyaf bandits holding the Red Cross workers on 17 March.

^{15a}“Andreas Notter ‘released,’ not rescued, Sen. Gordon insists,” 20 April 2009, GMA News, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/157726/Andreas-Notter-released-not-rescued-Sen-Gordon-insists>

^{16a}Gordon: Swiss aid worker walked free; Senators concerned over Italian captive,” 19 April 2009, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/topstories/topstories/view/20090419-200229/Gordon-Swiss-aid-worker-walked-free>

^{17a}“Andreas Notter ‘released,’ not rescued, Sen. Gordon insists,” 20 April 2009, GMA News, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/157726/Andreas-Notter-released-not-rescued-Sen-Gordon-insists>

^{18a}Ibid

^{19a}“1,000 Government Troops Ring Abu Stronghold,” 20 April 2009, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20090420-200309/1000-govt-troops-ring-Abu-stronghold>

^{20a}“AFP: Sayyaf left with no option but to free Vagni,” 19 April 2009, GMA News, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/157683/AFP-Sayyaf-left-with-no-option-but-to-free-Vagni>

^{21a}Ibid

^{22a}“7T displaced by Sulu hostage crisis,” 13 April 2009, Sunstar, <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/network/7t-displaced-sulu-hostage-crisis>