

Release of Hostage In Beirut Delayed

U.S. Refusal to Dispatch Envoy Cited

By Caryle Murphy
Washington Post Foreign Service

DAMASCUS, Syria, April 19—Lebanese kidnappers said tonight in Beirut that they have postponed freeing an American hostage because of the refusal by the United States to dispatch a senior State Department official here to make final arrangements for the release.

The statement by the Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine has at least temporarily halted the freeing of one of three American educators held hostage by the Iranian-backed Lebanese group since January 1987. On Wednesday, the kidnappers had announced that they would release one American hostage "within 48 hours."

Tonight's announcement, delivered to Western and Arab news organizations in Beirut, appeared to surprise senior Syrian government officials here who had seemed convinced that the release would take place Friday.

Foreign Minister Farouk Charaa, who conferred for more than an hour with U.S. Ambassador Edward Djerjian tonight, said after the announcement: "We hope this American hostage will be released either on Saturday or Sunday."

The message repeated the group's demand made Wednesday that John Kelly, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, come to Damascus to complete arrangements for the hostage's release.

"Kelly's failure to respond has so far frustrated the release, which made us postpone this operation until the picture is cleared," the kidnappers said.

The Bush administration refused to dispatch Kelly to Damascus, saying his presence here could be seen as engaging in negotiations for the release of one of eight American hostages held by various Shiite Moslem fundamentalist groups in Lebanon. The United States has called for the unconditional freeing of the hostages and said it will not negotiate for their freedom.

The kidnappers did not say how long they would postpone the hostage release, but their statement

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Bush Spurns Captors' 'Demands'

By David Hoffman
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KEY LARGO, Fla., April 19—President Bush said today he decided not to send Assistant Secretary of State John H. Kelly to Damascus as requested by a pro-Iranian group holding American hostages because "the United States does not knuckle under to demands" by such groups.

"The U.S. position is clear—we do not meet demands," Bush said at a joint news conference with French President Francois Mitterrand whom he met with here to discuss U.S.-European issues.

Although administration officials earlier in the day had suggested that a message from the pro-Iranian group might lead to the release of an American hostage held in Lebanon, Bush took a more pessimistic tone after the group announced it would postpone the release because Kelly had not been sent.

"We've been disappointed before, hopes raised only to have them dashed by excessive speculation," Bush said. He said the United States is "not talking to the hostage holders."

"So let me just take this opportunity to repeat what I said when I first became president," Bush said. "Goodwill begets goodwill. And I link that to release of American hostages. We can't have normal relations [with Iran] when hostages are held." Referring to both Iran and Libya, Bush said

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expressed hope that Syrian Brig. Gen. Ghazi Kenaan "will head to Beirut to wrap up the issue upon the arrival of Kelly in Damascus." Kenaan, Syria's military intelligence chief in Lebanon, has played a key role in past hostage releases in Beirut.

The statement was accompanied by a photograph of Robert Polhill, one of the three Americans seized Jan. 24, 1987, from Beirut University College by men masquerading as campus police.

Wednesday's communique by Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine was accompanied by a picture of Jesse Turner, implying that the 42-year-old mathematics professor would be the American set free. The group also holds Alann Steen, a journalism professor who turns 51 Sunday. Polhill, 55, taught accounting at the college.

The captors said Wednesday that they had decided to release a hostage in response to appeals from both Iranian and Syrian officials for a "goodwill initiative in order to close the hostage file." But the group also indicated that it expects to see the "goodwill" met in kind. "We are ready for either positive response or escalation, and the other party has to choose," the message said. It did not make clear, however, whether Kelly's presence in Damascus was an essential condition for the release.

U.S. officials appear to have been unaware of a possible hostage release this week. Djerejian was in Bonn Wednesday for a meeting with Kelly and other American envoys. The ambassador returned here late this afternoon and later met with Charaa at the Foreign Ministry.

Afterward, Djerejian said only, "We are in close contact with the Syrian government."

Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine also repeated an earlier

threat to attack jetliners and airports used in the transport of emigrating Soviet Jews to Israel.

"The organization serves this final warning . . . on all those participating in this matter, especially those countries offering transit facilities," the statement said. "All civilians should stay away from the airports, airlines and jetliners that will be the targets for operations mounted at times we deem adequate."

It remained unclear whether tonight's postponement signals a tactical delay or final blow for the re-

lease soon of an American hostage. If this is merely a delay, observers said, the kidnapers may be hoping to extract more rewards for complying with Syrian and Iranian requests to free the captives. But if not, the captors may be asserting demands, such as Kelly's presence here, that they expect the United States to firmly reject in order to foil any further movement toward a resolution of the hostage issue.

Both Syria, which has 40,000 troops in Lebanon, and Iran have indicated in recent weeks that they want to see the hostages freed.

Iranian officials founded and continue to finance the Shiite Moslem fundamentalist groups in Lebanon that hold 17 Western hostages, including the Americans. Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine is believed also to have close links with Syrian intelligence officials.

In October 1988, the group released Mithilewar Singh, an Indian who was kidnapped with the three Americans at the college. At the time, U.S. and Arab sources said Syria played the key role in gaining his freedom. Syrian Foreign Minister Charaa announced the release.

Bush Rejects Request From Pro-Iranian Group

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of terror is terribly important . . . if we are to have better relations there."

U.S. officials said Syria had relayed a message to Washington saying that a hostage might be released, and Bush said "we are grateful to Syria for trying to play a constructive role in what is going on."

But a senior administration official in Washington said the Syrian message transmitted through diplomatic channels did not mention Kelly or any condition for release of the hostage. "The Syrian government did not request that we send Kelly," the official said. "The hostage holders did." The statement by the pro-Iranian group, the Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine, had said Kelly should come to Damascus "to coordinate some final steps."

The U.S. official cited three major reasons why the administration rejected "at least for now" Kelly's participation in an arrangement for the release of a hostage.

"This was a demand from hostage-takers and to send Kelly would clearly be part of meeting a demand," he said. "It would clearly to us and probably to you [the media] be construed

as negotiating with hostage-holders." Secondly, the official said, "the president feared that once Kelly got [to Damascus] there would, in fact, be further demands, not to say the whole world's attention on the hostage-situation. And we would be caught in that cycle." Finally, the official said, "We were extremely reluctant to send him into such a dangerous situation. How would it look if he turned into another Terry Waite?" An envoy of Britain's Anglican church negotiating for the release of hostages, Waite was captured in 1987.

Defending the decision not to send Kelly to Damascus, Bush and other officials noted the U.S. Ambassador to Syria, Edward Djerejian, was ordered to return to Damascus from Bonn in case a hostage was released, and that he had contacts with the Syrian foreign minister on the hostage issue.

At the news conference here, Mitterrand also defended France's efforts to gain the release last week of three French hostages—efforts that have been controversial because of the appearance that negotiations were held for their release.

In Washington a State Department official confirmed that on Wednesday

Syria had signalled an imminent hostage release to U.S. officials. "Syria let us know yesterday at about the same time the statement [from the pro-Iranian group] came out in Beirut that a hostage was coming out," the official said. "It is not surprising if it takes place that Syria would like to take credit."

In a related development yesterday, a House panel brushed aside administration objections and approved a non-binding resolution condemning Iraq for human rights abuses, including torture and executions. The resolution by the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on human rights cited Iraq's use of chemical weapons against its Kurdish minority in 1988 and persistent repression of all political opposition, among other violations.

Rep. Gus Yatron (D-Pa.) subcommittee chairman, said the State Department opposed the measure because it referred to Iraq's "consistent pattern of gross violations" of human rights, language that in a binding resolution could trigger a cut-off of all U.S. aid to Iraq.

Staff writers Nora Boustany and Ann Devroy in Washington contributed to this report.