

THE CONFLICT IN IRAQ: ROME

Abduction of Peace Activists Brings War Home in Italy

By Ian Fisher

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ROME, Sept. 8 - The greatest shock here was not just the awful fact itself, that two vibrant young Italian women were kidnapped in Iraq, dragged from their office by attackers who, it seems, knew their names. The deeper jolt was that they worked for a relief group that was outspokenly against the war in Iraq and helped child victims of the war.

And so Europe seemed pulled still deeper into a war that most of its citizens opposed, stripped once again of hope that such opposition would provide protection from future kidnappings or terror attacks.

It is a reality that France, the nation that opposed the war in Iraq most strongly, has also confronted in recent days, with the abduction of two French journalists by kidnapers who demanded a repeal of the country's ban on head scarves for girls in public schools.

"We are very worried because this kind of kidnapping shows that terrorists are perhaps changing their strategy," said Marina Sereni, a leader of the Italian opposition party Democrats of the Left, which opposes Italy's participation in the Iraq war. "They are menacing all of the people there, even committed peace activists. This is a very bad situation."

La Repubblica, a left-leaning daily also opposed to the war, summed up the mood in a front-page headline that began 11 pages of coverage of the kidnapping on Tuesday in Baghdad: "Message to Italy: No One Is Safe." Below that was a photograph of the two women, Simona Torretta and Simona Pari, both 29 and members of the relief group, A Bridge to Baghdad, smiling in Iraq sometime before the kidnapping.

There is no indication yet that the kidnappings have changed any minds here on the volatile issue of the war. Officials from the conservative government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, apparently working to justify its unpopular decision to send 3,000 troops to Iraq, have been quoted over the last day as saying the kidnappings show that militant Islam is bent on all-out war with all Westerners, whatever their views.

Opponents of the war said the kidnappings underscored the basic anger and chaos unleashed by the military occupation of Iraq.

But on Wednesday, internal sniping in Italy was kept to a whisper, as the government, the opposition, religious leaders and peace groups called for an unaccustomed unity to help secure the women's release.

Mr. Berlusconi returned to Rome early from a trip in northern Italy to call an emergency meeting with opposition groups to formulate a united strategy to win the women's release. Opposition leaders said after

the meeting that they would cooperate with the government on the issue and that they "totally and completely" condemned terrorism, even as they repeated their opposition to the war.

Mr. Berlusconi's spokesman, Paolo Bonaiuti, said after the meeting that Italy was committed to using all means to secure the women's release, though he said it was too early to specify the exact steps.

The prime minister's quick response seemed in some degree a reaction to the harsh criticism he received for not acting swiftly enough after another Italian, Enzo Baldoni, a freelance journalist who was also a peace activist, was kidnapped in August in Iraq and later killed.

The relative inaction of Mr. Berlusconi's government came under special fire after the French government sent its foreign minister, Michel Barnier, to the Middle East to help secure the release of two French journalists, kidnapped shortly after Mr. Baldoni. The journalists have yet to be released.

But Mr. Berlusconi seemed motivated too by what one government official called "a national crisis," driven by strong feeling for the two women, whose lives and work in Baghdad were covered in great detail in the country's news media.

Like the opposition leaders, Mr. Bonaiuti said it was crucial that the nation's leaders show themselves as united to confront that crisis and secure the women's release.

"We have differences with our opposition on political issues, on whether we should be in Iraq," he said. "But at the moment, we have decided to put this problem aside and to stay united against terrorism."

But in Italy, such shows of unity often prove short-lived, and there were reminders on Wednesday of the deep distrust between the Berlusconi government and antiwar activists.

Raffaella Bolini, a leader of Stop the War, an umbrella group that organized mass antiwar demonstrations last year, said Wednesday that while Italy was in "a time of real unity," she urged the government not to politicize the kidnappings.

"We ask the government not to exploit this," she told reporters here. "We don't want to give an alibi for anyone who wants to build a case for a clash of civilizations."

A Bridge to Baghdad, the group for which the two kidnapped women worked, is explicitly opposed to the war. In a recent television interview, Ms. Pari, one of the two women, was quoted as calling the troops in Iraq "occupying forces."

Religious leaders also reacted to the abductions with swift and strong condemnation. Pope John Paul II took part in a prayer for the women's freedom at his weekly Wednesday general audience. On Tuesday, a group of Iraqi Muslims meeting in Milan for an interreligious conference issued a statement calling for the hostages' immediate release.

"In this way, the name of Iraq will be honored," the statement read.