

US missionary, captive for 20 months, is alive, reports Niger's president



For 20 months, there has been no news of Jeff Woodke (Photo: Facebook/Blaise Gaitou)

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A US missionary kidnapped in Niger in October 2016 is alive, according to the West African nation's president.

Jeff Woodke, who worked for Jeunesse en Mission Entraide et Developpement (JEMED), a branch of the US-based Youth With a Mission, was abducted by unknown assailants late in the evening of Friday 14 October, 2016, from the town of Abalak in northern Niger.

For 20 months, there has been no news of Woodke, but on Monday, 4 June, President Mahamadou Issoufou told TV channel France24 that both he and a German aid worker kidnapped in April this year are alive.

“We have some news; we know they’re alive,” the president said. “We continue to create the conditions for their release. Perhaps the contacts that are underway will help to achieve that goal.”

It is the first proof of life since the kidnapping of the two Western citizens in the Sahel country.

Little had been known, or at least divulged, about Woodke’s condition or location, other than that his captors were tracked to neighbouring Mali by Nigerian authorities. No group has publicly claimed responsibility.

Last July, a coalition of jihadist groups active in the Sahel region (NIsrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, also known as the Group to Support Islam and Muslims), affiliated to Al-Qaeda, released a video showing six foreign hostages, including three missionaries, but not Jeff Woodke.

The three missionaries in the video were: Colombian nun Gloria Argoti, kidnapped on 7 February from her convent in Karangasso, southern Mali; Australian surgeon Ken Elliott, kidnapped in January 2016 from Djibo in northern Burkina Faso, near the Mali border; and Swiss missionary Béatrice Stockly, kidnapped in Mali’s northern town of Timbuktu, also in January 2016.

All are still captive.

Jeff Woodke’s wife, Els, issued a video pleading for his safe return when there was no sign of him in that video, believing that he could also be held by those who issued it.

“I am sure that the families of the captives were very encouraged by this message and appreciated the mercy shown by Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen in sending this news and instructions about their loved ones,” said Mrs Woodke in her video.

“But my husband Jeff is not mentioned, so I did not receive the benefit of the reassurance and directions of how to proceed that the other families did. This has been very hard for me, for Jeff’s sons and his father to understand.”

The German Joerg Lange, employed by the aid group Help, was kidnapped by armed men on 11 April, in Niger’s western town of Ayorou, which shares a border with troubled northern Mali.

No group has claimed responsibility for his abduction, but a security source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP that his kidnappers had “already taken him to northern Mali”.

On Monday, President Issoufou said he did not know exactly where the pair were being detained, but that “it is more likely that they are in Mali”.