

Deadline to release Muslim prisoners passes, Gaza-held journalists released

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A midnight deadline to release Muslim prisoners has passed and two Fox News journalists have been released.

The two journalists, American Steve Centanni, 60, a reporter for Fox News and New Zealander Olaf Wiig, 36, Centanni's cameraman were kidnapped from their press vehicle on August 14. Ten days later, the two journalists appeared in a video allegedly made by the kidnappers. In it, the journalists said that they were being treated well.

According to Mr Centanni, the pair were ordered to convert to Islam at gunpoint. He told Fox News: "I have the highest respect for Islam... but it was something we felt we had to do because they had the guns and we didn't know what the hell was going on."

In a press conference earlier today, the two told of their joy at being released. They also urged journalists not to be deterred from reporting in Gaza. "I hope that this never scares a single journalist away from coming to Gaza to cover the story because the Palestinian people are very beautiful and kind-hearted," Mr Centanni said. "The world needs to know more about them. Don't be discouraged," he added.

Holy Jihad Brigades, a previously unknown group, claims responsibility for the kidnappings. They were demanding the release of all Muslim prisoners being held in the United States. In exchange they promised they would release the journalists, but the United States immediately rejected the offer. "I want to clarify that the efforts are not negotiations, but we want to get to positive results which is their release and that is all. We will continue our efforts and contacts to secure the release of the kidnapped journalists. We can confirm that they are safe and sound but we cannot give fuller details for the time being because we want our efforts to be crowned with success," said Abu Hilal, spokesman for the Interior Ministry.

On Saturday, Ghazi Hamad, a Hamas government spokesman said: "I hope that we can hear good news within the coming two days."

Anita McNaught, the wife of Wiig, recently appeared on TV calling for the release of the journalists.

The two journalists were dropped off at Gaza City's Beach Hotel, several hours after a video showed them delivering an anti-Western speech.