

BBC correspondent Alan Johnston has been released by kidnappers in the Gaza Strip after 114 days in

Contributed by Administrator
Wednesday, 04 July 2007
Last Updated Wednesday, 04 July 2007

BBC - Mr Johnston, 45, was handed over to armed men in Gaza City. He said his ordeal was like "being buried alive" but it was "fantastic" to be free.

And he described how he had been unable to see the sun for three months, and had once been chained for 24 hours.

Rallies worldwide had called for Mr Johnston's release. An online petition was signed by some 200,000 people.

Mr Johnston's father Graham said he and his wife were "overjoyed" at their son's release.

"It's been 114 days of a living nightmare," he said.

UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown also expressed his joy at Mr Johnston's release.

Alan Johnston Freed, CNN Report July 3, 2007
{youtube}NI-BHiWKaKA{/youtube}

The BBC reporter was handed over to officials of the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, which controls Gaza, in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

He later appeared beside Hamas leader Ismail Haniya and thanked everyone who had worked for his release. He is now at the British Consulate in Jerusalem.

Hamas gunmen overran Gaza last month, expelling their rivals from the Fatah faction and prompting its leader, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, to sack Mr Haniya as prime minister.

Mr Haniya said the result "confirms [Hamas] is serious in imposing security and stability and maintaining law and order in this very dear part of our homeland".

'Dreamt of freedom'

At the news conference, Mr Johnston thanked everyone who had worked towards his release.

He described his experience of captivity as "appalling" and "occasionally quite terrifying".

"It became quite hard to imagine normal life again," he said.

"The last 16 weeks have been the very worst of my life," he added. "I was in the hands of people who were dangerous and unpredictable."

"I literally dreamt many times of being free and always woke up back in that room."

Mr Johnston said he was not tortured during captivity but he did fall ill from the food he was served.

He added that he had been kept in four different locations, two of them only briefly.

He was able to see the sun in the first month but was then kept in a shuttered room until a week before his release, he said.

He was kept in chains for 24 hours but was not harmed physically until the last half hour of his captivity, when his captors hit him "a bit".

Mr Johnston said Hamas's seizure of power in Gaza and its subsequent pledge to improve security in the territory had facilitated his release.

"The kidnapers seemed very comfortable and very secure in their operation until... a few weeks ago, when Hamas took charge of the security operation here," he said.

He said that he was told he was going home on Tuesday night.

"I thought at first 'They are moving me again', and I thought maybe they're handing me on to new kidnapers but then as we got deeper and deeper into Gaza City, I really began at last to believe that maybe we were finishing it," he said.

Radio contact

Mr Johnston was abducted on 12 March by the Army of Islam, a shadowy militant group dominated by Gaza's powerful Dugmush clan.

The group released three videos, two of which featured footage of the kidnapped correspondent.

It said it would kill its captive if its demands for the release of Muslim prisoners in British custody were not met.

But Mr Johnston said his abductors had also offered him freedom in exchange for making one of the videos, admitting that some of the things he had been forced to say were factually incorrect.

Having worked in Gaza for the past three years, Mr Johnston said he was well aware of Palestinian traditions of hospitality and regarded his abductors as an "aberration".

He said he was looking forward to being re-united with his family in Scotland, expressing sorrow that his "actions" had brought turmoil to their lives.

He had a brief conversation with his father over the telephone after being released.

Mr Johnston said he stayed aware of efforts to free him by listening to the BBC World Service on the radio.

News of global demonstrations in his support was a source of comfort to him, he said.

The BBC has issued a statement expressing relief and delight at its employee's release.

Mr Johnston left the Gaza Strip later on Wednesday morning, entering Israel via the Erez crossing.

BBC correspondent Alan Johnston has been released after 114 days in captivity in the Gaza Strip. He describes the "appalling experience" at the hands of his captors, called the Army of Islam.

I am hugely grateful to all the people - an amazing number of people that worked on the Palestinian side, the British government, the BBC from top to bottom, and a huge amount of support from BBC listeners and viewers. I had a radio almost throughout, and was able to follow all the extraordinary level of support and interest in my case, and it was a huge psychological boost.

I am immensely grateful. It's just the most fantastic thing to be free.

It was an appalling experience as you can imagine - 16 weeks kidnapped, sometimes quite terrifying, and frightening always because I didn't know how it was going end...

It was like being buried alive really, removed from the world and occasionally terrifying...

It became almost hard to imagine normal life again.

I literally dreamt many times of being free, and always woke up back in that room. And now it really is over, and it really is indescribably good.

Last night, when they took me downstairs and said you're going to Britain, they had actually said that once before when they moved me to another prison, so I was really fighting the desire to believe that it was all about to end.

And even when I was in the car, I thought at first 'They are moving me again', and I thought maybe they're handing me on to new kidnapers, but then as we got deeper and deeper into Gaza City, I really began at last to believe that maybe we were finishing it.

When they let me out of the car, there were gunmen around and so on and I thought, 'No, no these are more kidnappers', but they I saw Fayed Abu Shammala who I'd worked with for three years and the most fantastic moment, and I really only then, only then believed it was over.

'Dangerous group'

[The captors] were often rude and unpleasant, as you can imagine.

They did threaten my life, really, a number of times in various ways.

There was one 24-hour period when they seemed to get very angry with the negotiation process, and they chained me up by my hands and ankles. But that only lasted 24 hours.

I was in Gaza for three years, and I know very well what Palestinian culture is, and the extraordinary warmth and hospitality - especially of Gaza.

I knew that the handful of people that kidnapped me were a complete aberration - something completely other.

My memories of Gaza will be very much of the best kind, despite what happened to me.

It's true that the kidnappings - I covered 27 of them here, almost all of them were over in about 12 days.

I knew that there was one very dangerous group. I knew about them, and I was always afraid of them. They struck first last August, and I was worried that they might get me one day, and they indeed did.

Across the Palestinian spectrum politically there was condemnation of the kidnapping and calls for my release and so on.

[Hamas leader Ismail] Haniya from the outset was very clear in his view.

I remember him saying that I was guest of the Palestinian people, and it wasn't right what was happening, and he was very solid from the beginning in going against the kidnappers and working to free me.

I have to say, though, that the kidnappers seemed very comfortable and very secure in their operation - until a couple of weeks ago when it became clear that Hamas would be in charge of the security situation on their own here, and after that the kidnappers were much more nervous and began to realise - and I began to feel that perhaps, if I was lucky, the end was coming.

Here are some of the reactions to his release.

GRAHAM JOHNSTON, REPORTER'S FATHER

"It's a wonderful morning, I can't tell you. We got the phone call late last night from the BBC and we're absolutely overjoyed.

"It's been 114 days of a living nightmare and just to hear his voice. He telephoned us. There was a lot of noise in the background - I think he was being jostled a lot - and all he said was: 'Hello, Dad' and I: 'Hello, Son, I hear you're alright'.

"He said: 'I'm a hundred percent'. And then the phone was cut. So that's all we've had from him so far - but we've seen him on the box and it's just incredible; it's been a long 114 days."

BBC STATEMENT

"We are delighted and extremely relieved that our friend and colleague, Alan Johnston, has been released.

"This is wonderful news for his family, friends and colleagues - and everyone around the world who has shown their support for him over the past 114 days.

"We thank all of those who worked tirelessly - here and in the wider Middle East - to secure his freedom."

BBC Director General Mark Thompson interview

ISMAIL HANIYA, SACKED PALESTINIAN PRIME MINISTER

"This case was a first priority for the Hamas government. We made a big effort in past months to free him. He is the friend of the Palestinian people."

KHALED MESHAAL, HAMAS LEADER

"This early morning we are, in Hamas and as Palestinians, very happy to reach this point, which is the release of Mr Alan Johnston. So our best regards and congratulations to his family, and to his colleagues in the BBC.

"From the beginning we considered the issue of Alan Johnston as a national and moral and humanitarian issue. And our message at this moment is that nobody in Palestine - especially in Gaza - is above the law.

"We hope that it will be the last kidnapping in Gaza inch Allah (God willing)."

GORDON BROWN, UK PRIME MINISTER

"I welcome the good news of Alan Johnston's release. This will come as a great relief to his family and friends and all those who have worked to see him freed."

DAVID MILIBAND, UK FOREIGN SECRETARY

"I am delighted that Alan Johnston has finally be released... Immediate priorities are to ensure that he is well and that he is re-united with his family who have not seen him for 114 days.

"Throughout Alan's ordeal we have seen an outstanding show of support and concern for him from around the world. The Palestinian people showed their repugnancy at Alan's kidnap.

"Palestinian President Abbas strongly condemned Alan's kidnapping and demanded that it be brought to an end. Ismail Haniya and Hamas spokesmen denounced the hostage-takers and demanded Alan's release.

"I fully acknowledge the crucial role they have played in securing this happy outcome. And hundreds and thousands of ordinary Palestinians, especially in Gaza, campaigned tirelessly for Alan's release.

"Hostage-taking is an abhorrent crime. I hope that the overwhelming support shown for Alan in the last four months has show that all decent people believe that taking hostages can never be a legitimate means to achieve any ends."

MANUEL HASSASSIAN, PALESTINIAN AMBASSADOR TO UK

"You can't imagine how relieved we are as Palestinians to see Alan, who has always been a friend of the Palestinian people, an objective reporter, a man with valiance, with courage, a man with a heart of steel.

"When I was watching television this morning and I was looking at Alan he reminded me how powerful he is, how powerfully he's committed to his journalism, to his reporting."

MUSTAPHA BARGHOUTI, PALESTINIAN EX-MINISTER

"I am very very happy, very pleased like many many people now. I think this is a great moment for Alan Johnston himself, for his family and for his very good colleagues at the BBC.

"This is a very good moment for the freedom of press in the world - worldwide and in Palestine in particular."

ELAINA QLEIBOX, OXFAM WORKER IN GAZA

"[Alan Johnston] was extremely loved by everybody, because he made a point of walking and not having bodyguards, not even in the worst moments.

"He was a person who touched the people... It's like this sigh of relief.

"We are aware this will not change the reaction of the West for Hamas, because Hamas does not recognise and accept the presence of Israel, so in the last instance nothing will change.

"But it is very hopeful that there is a feeling that the situation is being controlled and without the need for the use or arms."

