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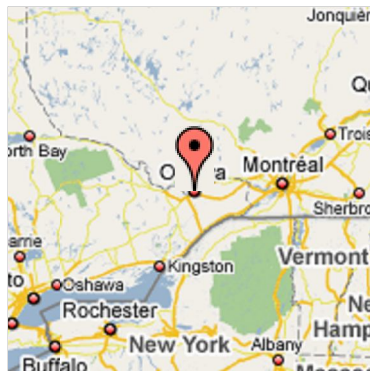
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Canadian raid to free abducted journalist planned, aborted: security source

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OTTAWA — Three days after CBC reporter Mellissa Fung was kidnapped, Canadian intelligence agents and elite commandos were confident they knew where she was being held and planned a rescue.

But as so often happens in clandestine operations, the plan to free the Canadian journalist in a lightning raid went awry, a senior intelligence source told The Canadian Press.

U.S. Special Forces conducted their own, separate hostage rescue in roughly the same area west of the Afghan capital on the night of Oct. 15, as a Canadian commando team was laying its plans to go after Fung.

"It stirred up a real hornet's nest and we thought afterwards that they had probably moved her," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The disclosure provided a rare glimpse behind the scenes at the extraordinary efforts the Canadian military, intelligence officers and diplomats on the ground went to in order to rescue Fung.

For days after the American raid, the region buzzed with outraged militants whose ground fire brought down a U.S. helicopter.

In the end, it appears Afghan officials were able to negotiate Fung's release through local tribal elders in Wardak province, a mostly lawless region of snow-capped mountain creases west of Kabul.

Almost from the outset, Canadian military and intelligence officers were convinced Fung was being held in the region, a favourite hideout for the Taliban as well as kidnappers and bandits who prey upon travellers along the Kabul-to-Kandahar highway.

Security and defence officials refused to discuss further details saying they did not want to compromise military tactics. But it is a known fact that NATO has sophisticated eavesdropping techniques.

The source said security authorities were confident that Fung's captors belonged to the "criminal entrepreneur class" that has arisen in Afghanistan over the last five years, and not the Taliban.

Militants have attempted to turn the kidnapping of foreigners into a cottage industry, but those abductions are usually meant to score propaganda points - or used as political leverage to win the release of jailed insurgents.

The notion that the Taliban were not involved was reinforced by militants themselves when they told the Afghan media in the immediate aftermath of Fung's abduction that they were not involved.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in announcing her release Saturday, refused to discuss details of the exhaustive Canadian effort to win her freedom.

"In terms of the role played by the government of Canada, I just say, you know, there were a wide range of agencies, literally hundreds of people involved at our end; similarly with the government of Afghanistan," Harper said.

"They worked in full co-operation at all stages. Beyond that there's not a lot I can say."

He praised Afghan President Hamid Karzai, whom Harper telephoned immediately after he was notified of the kidnapping while on the campaign trail, two days before the federal election.

"He promised me the full co-operation and engagement of his government and he delivered," Harper told a news conference in Ottawa.

The prime minister emphatically said no ransom had been paid.

It is known that a team of Canada's ultra-secret JTF-2 commandos, who were operating in Afghanistan and due to be rotated home when the kidnapping happened, were ordered to remain and assist.

Hostage rescues are difficult and rarely attempted.

The freeing of the American hostage - a civilian working for the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers - made headlines in the United States. It was believed to be the first known hostage rescue by U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

Several hostage-takers were apparently killed in the attack.

The hostage's name was not released, but U.S. authorities acknowledged he had been captured by criminals in late August and held at a hideaway in the Nirkh district of Wardak.

Aside from the American raid, only two other such missions are known to have occurred in Afghanistan, both in 2007. In one pre-dawn operation, both Italian captives were wounded in a raid by Italian commandos.

Fung was kidnapped two days before the Canadian federal election after visiting a refugee camp in the Qambar district, on the outskirts of Kabul.

She had been in the area apparently at the invitation of village elders, said officials with the Afghan Interior Ministry.