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news

Iraqi Member Survives Kidnapping, Thanks ASCE for Support

By Mark Fitzgerald

On September 7 Ra'ad Ali Abdul Azziz, P.E., an ASCE member, was kidnapped along with three women (Mahnouz Bassam, Simona Torretta, and Simona Pari) from his office in the Al-Wehda region of Baghdad, where he was working as an engineer for Un ponte per Baghdad (A Bridge to Baghdad), a nongovernmental humanitarian group seeking to improve the condition of public works in Iraq. In the months preceding he had been corresponding with ASCE through Lawrence H. Roth, P.E., the Society's deputy executive director, and had received educational materials from the Society for use at the University of Baghdad's College of Engineering. On September 28, following three weeks in captivity, Azziz and the three women were released unharmed. In the following interview he discusses his work and recounts his experiences.

Q: Can you please describe the nature of your work and your affiliation with A Bridge to Baghdad?

A: I joined the Italian nongovernmental organization [NGO] Un ponte per Baghdad, or UPP, as we call it, in September 2002 as a civil engineer. I was working in the rehabilitation of primary health care centers, water treatment plants [WTPs], and schools. I was the only engineer in the NGO and I was responsible for making assessments for structural and civil items, preparing the bill of quantities, following up official papers and procedures, and supervising the work. Our projects were in Basra and Baghdad.

As a humanitarian organization, during the war, starting in March of 2003, the nature of our work changed to include emergency activities, such as supplying tents with provisions for a camp for internally displaced people. That was expected during the war. I was working with Simona Torretta day and night during the bombing. But when the American troops entered Baghdad on April 3, I couldn't continue my work because of the battles in the streets. It was very dangerous to move in the city.

When the main battles stopped, I returned to work with the organization. That was on April 17. Our activities changed at that time. The country was in a big mess and the infrastructure was in its worst condition. We started some emergency projects, such as supplying the hospitals with oxygen and medicine and installing water purification units for operating theaters and other important departments. Our activities reached Basra, in southern Iraq, where we began a great project to rehabilitate eight WTPs.

Day by day, when the situation started to improve, I returned to our projects to rehabilitate the primary schools in Baghdad and Basra. Until the Fallujah and [Muqtada] Sadr crises in April 2004, we resumed emergency projects to supply potable water for the families inside the city.

Q: How long has A Bridge to Baghdad existed and what are its goals?

A: UPP was established immediately following the Gulf War in 1991. As a humanitarian NGO, UPP helped Iraqi people who suffered from wars and international sanctions. It was the only Italian organization working in Iraq during the dictatorship regime in the 1990s. In the beginning, the group focused on supplying medicines to children, on educational activities for primary school students, and on cultural activities in Iraqi universities. In 1998 UPP started a project to rehabilitate primary schools in Baghdad and later in Basra. At that time UPP just replaced old windows, but in 2000 the projects became more comprehensive. The last project covered everything, including building new classrooms inside the schools.

Q: Where was the office located and how many people worked there?

A: Before the war, the UPP office was in the Al-Fanar Hotel, very close to the Meridian Hotel in Baghdad. That was because of the intelligence restrictions of the regime. The idea was to gather all international NGOs in one place for better control. After the war, UPP moved to a house in one of the most important areas in Baghdad: the Al-Wehda area. The house became the office for three Italian NGOs. The office was very close to the Ibn Al-Haitham Hospital, the World Health Organization, and the Ministry of Environment. Before the war, only a few employees were working with UPP: the Italian head of mission, an engineer, a secretary, and a driver. But after the war our activities

started to increase and about twelve employees began working in the Baghdad and Basra offices, including three civil engineers and two mechanical engineers.

Q: Did you know Mahnouz Bassam, Simona Torretta, and Simona Pari well before the kidnapping?

A: Simona Torretta is a very active member in UPP. She came to Iraq for the first time in 1994, when she was only nineteen years old. The first time I met her, in January 2003, she was with an Italian delegation to Iraq. She became the head of mission in Iraq on March 23, 2003, and entered the country only five days after the beginning of the war. I've worked with her since that time. We went through a lot of critical and dangerous moments during the war and later.

Simona Pari came to Iraq for the first time in August 2003. She was responsible for a comprehensive Project for the children that involved rehabilitation of the school buildings. I was very close to her.

Mahnouz, or Mahnaz, was working with another Italian NGO called INTERSOS, based in the same building as ours. I didn't know her very well before the abduction.

Q: Why do you think the abduction took place?

A: This is the question that I wonder about. The kidnappers informed me that they didn't want any foreigners in Iraq.

Q: Did you ever imagine something like this would happen?

A: Yes, of course. Since the situation grew more critical here and the fighters started kidnapping foreigners, I thought that someone might attack us. But I never imagined an action in this way.

Q: Were the kidnappers an Islamic group?

A: They were an Islamic, Sunni, and Salafist [fundamentalist] group. They were not an Abu Musab al-Zarqawi group.

Q: Do you have any idea what they wanted?

A: They said that they didn't want any foreigners in Iraq. In the beginning, they told me something about the Iraqi women prisoners in Abu Ghraib, but they did not mention it again.

Q: If you are willing, please describe the conditions of your captivity.

A: On September 7, at 5 PM Baghdad time, about twenty fighters entered our office. It seemed as though they knew everything about our office. The two Simonas were very close to me when a gunman entered my room. He shouted to exit the room, and then another gunman forced me into a car. They put the women in another car. They covered my eyes and bound my hands. Four men were in my car armed with guns. They forced me to the floor of the car and covered me with clothes. When we reached their destination—of course I don't know where that was—they took me to a room and examined everything in my clothes and questioned me about UPP and its activities. At first, they thought that I was Italian. The first three days they were terrible to me. But later, their treatment started to be better. The food was very good. I was alone in a mud room with a small window very close to the roof. I was sleeping on the ground on a sleeper. My eyes were covered for the first four days but afterward they removed the blindfold. They did not allow me to look at their faces, and they warned me a lot about that.

Q: Was it difficult to survive?

A: I came face to face with death about four to five times during my kidnapping. But I believe in God. This is all I can say.

Q: Did your release come as a surprise?

A: We were released on Tuesday, September 28. A few days before, one of the kidnappers told me that they would release us. On Tuesday I was informed that they were waiting for a phone call and I would have to be ready. They moved me to a car, and I closed my eyes so I couldn't see anything. They put me in the front seat. I realized then that there were two women sitting behind me: the two Simonas. I knew that somebody went to drop Mahnaz at her house.

Q: There are rumors that Italy paid a million dollars to the kidnappers. Do you believe it?

A: I don't know about this. I heard from the media a lot of rumors. Some of them said that they did not get any money, while others said they received five million dollars.

Q: How has this terrible incident changed you?

A: I am stronger and more mature than before. You know, bad things can teach you a lot. I learned a lot about life and death, about myself, and about God. For me, and maybe also for the other women, it is like a rebirth. I have to celebrate this life. I have to reopen my eyes to the daylight from a much better perspective. All my friends and relatives asked me to forget everything, but I believe that I have to remember that experience very well for the rest of my life. I want to learn more and more from what happened.

Q: Will you continue your work as before?

A: The UPP office was closed immediately after our abduction. It was very clear from our abductors that we would have to shut down the office in Iraq. It is a serious situation. What has happened has destroyed all my plans, and in one way or another, it has destroyed my life—or previous life. I need time to understand what happened and to rearrange my thoughts and my plans. Bad times can teach you a lot. I am more mature, full of self-confidence, and stronger than before. I know I will survive and be a better person. I had great dreams for my country. I worked hard because I believed in those dreams. My activities as an ASCE member were part of that effort, and I thank ASCE—particularly Larry Roth for his great support. I had plans to start a series of lectures in the College of Engineering at the University of Baghdad using the ASCE educational materials that were supplied to me. My great dream for my country is stronger, but it is clear to me that I have to rearrange my plans. I am sure that I will reach my dream, sooner or later, but for now I have to find another way. I know that ASCE will be with me in my new path—I am very sure about that.