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HOPE FOR SA HOSTAGE



DOING WELL: Stephen McGown, who was taken hostage by al-Qaeda militants in Timbuktu, Mali, four years ago, appears to be in good health in a video released by his captors.

Proof of life after years of silence by captors

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THEY'RE alive and well. The long-awaited proof-of-life videos of the two hostages held in Mali for the past four years were handed over to South African aid organisation Gift of the Givers on Tuesday.

"My wife and my family, I am well. I hope you all are well back home. I understand that I may be seeing you soon," said South African hostage Stephen McGown in one of the videos.

McGown and Swede Johan Gustafsson were kidnapped in Timbuktu by al-Qaeda militants in the West African country four years ago. There had been no confirmation that the men were still alive, and Gift of the Givers, recently brought in to try to negotiate the men's release, managed to make contact with the captors last week.

They were promised the proof-of-life videos then, but these were not delivered until Tuesday, when Gift of the Givers obtained the footage of the hostages in good health.

"We're pretty excited as you can imagine. We're finally making



APPEAL: In this video released earlier this year, South African Stephen McGown, front, and Swede Johan Gustafsson asked their respective governments to help secure their release.

“The road is still long but we will make progress”

progress,” said McGown's father Malcolm.

He and his wife hope they might see their son in person before the end of the year.

The videos, one of each man, are apparently dated October 20.

"Given our interactions over the last few weeks and the content of the video, that date is absolutely credible and realistic," said Gift of the Givers chairman Dr Imtiaz Sooliman.

The footage, which has since been posted on YouTube, shows the men energised with the promise of their release.

Gift of the Givers agreed to assist the McGown family in securing Stephen's release and began establish-

ing contacts at the beginning of the year. It sent Mali negotiator Mohamed Yehia Dicko to the West African country in July.

Malcolm expressed his gratitude to Gift of the Givers for its swift results.

Last week, the organisation received a call from al-Qaeda to come and get the videos. Dicko arrived in Bamako on the anniversary of the hostages' capture last Wednesday and has since been working tirelessly to obtain proof of life.

After several days of stalling, the captors kept their promise and released the videos to Gift of the Givers.

In the 42-second video, McGown, his long beard tinged with grey, thanks the South African government and Gift of the Givers for their role in negotiating his release.

"I believe there is an organisation involved now. I thank this organisation for everything," a visibly relieved McGown says.

In a separate short video, Gustafsson acknowledges and thanks

Gift of the Givers as well as his government for pushing for his release.

He adds that he is "safe and sound and in good health", and that he longs to return to his family.

Sooliman is satisfied with the content of the video and said it was promising with regard to the men's release.

"The most heartening aspect of the video is the fact that the captives are now aware that negotiations are under way for their release, which would certainly instil a great deal of hope and positivity in them.

"The road is still long, but we will make progress."

In the videos, the captives say the date is October 20, which Gift of the Givers said was credible and realistic.

McGown's father made contact with Gift of the Givers in February last year, when the organisation was working towards releasing fellow South Africans Yolande and Pierre Korkie in Yemen.

Yolande was successfully released, but Pierre was killed last December.

“Sell one of your vehicles to raise the R50 000 bail”

huizen said the family were in the process of selling their 2014 model Mercedes-Benz.

The magistrate fixed bail at R50 000 and told Rikhotso to see what he can sell to raise the money before postponing the case to February 3.

BOTH MOLOSANKWE
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A JOBURG lawyer faces charges of fraud and theft over allegations that he defrauded the City of Joburg of about R13 million.

Allegations are that the city approached "Bibi" Rikhotso to open and administer an account containing money received from taxi owners whose vehicles had been scrapped as part of the taxi recapitalisation programme. The programme was to make way for the bus rapid transit (BRT) system.

Taxi owners would then pay the money into that account and

Lawyer up for defrauding Joburg city of R13m

become shareholders in Piotrans, which is a subsidiary of the City of Joburg and manages the operation of all Rea Vaya buses.

The City nominated Rikhotso's law firm, Bibi Rikhotso Incorporated, to open and administer a trust account. But he allegedly opened a money market account instead of a trust account and was the sole signatory to it.

Early this year, the council realised that something was amiss

and started investigating. Rikhotso was arrested on Monday.

The 40-year-old appeared in the Johannesburg Commercial Crime Court yesterday on a bail application. In an affidavit that Rikhotso prepared and which was read out by his lawyer, Corrie Nieuwenhuizen, the father-of-three said he was now unemployed because he had been disbarred.

He also stated that he had three houses but his main residence was

in Aspen Hills, south of Joburg.

His three children went to private schools. Since his disbarment, his wife was the breadwinner, and she was trying to get her law firm off the ground. Their finances were now so strained that they had put one of their houses on the market.

Rikhotso said he would be able to afford R50 000 for bail, but prosecutor Emma Tlou asked for a higher amount. "The State is not opposing bail and requests R100 000."

Nieuwenhuizen said they would not be able to afford that amount. "To raise that amount in such short time is difficult, if not impossible."

He said his "client's friends and family begged and borrowed, and managed to raise not less than R10 000, which they believe was a reasonable amount" for bail.

Nieuwenhuizen also told the magistrate that as Rikhotso had been struck off the roll, he could no longer afford most of his expenses.

Tlou, however, was not having any of that. "I am still sticking to my request of R100 000. In the affidavit they stated that they would be able to afford R50 000 and now they say they can only afford R10 000."

"This means there is no transparency in this court," she said.

Magistrate Jeremy Janse van Vuuren asked whether it would not be possible for Rikhotso to sell one of the couple's three vehicles to cover the bail amount. Nieu-

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