

Hostage issue persists despite release

By ANDRE HAUSER
Staff Writer

Former hostage Robert Polhill safely left Beirut after almost 39 months in captivity, but his release does not signal an end to hostage-taking as a political tool.

Polhill's release may have been an attempt by the pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine to increase its publicity, said Robert Neumann, former American ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Afghanistan. Kidnapping is an old and brutal custom, and it will continue to be used because it is so easy, he added.

Polhill was driven from Beirut to Damascus, and from there was flown to a U.S. military base in Wiesbaden, West Germany, for a medical examination and debriefing. He will stay there for up to two weeks, a common practice for newly released hostages, said Paul Luthringer, assistant director of media relations at the White House.

Doctors in West Germany said Polhill was malnourished and slightly dehydrated but seemed in good spirits.

It would be imprudent to put Polhill on a 12-hour flight after more than three years in captivity without assessing his health, Luthringer said. West Germany is about halfway between the Middle East and the United States, so it is a logical place to stop, he said.

Polhill will also be able to give military intelligence officers information that will help the hostages still in Beirut. No one knows for sure where the hos-

tages are, although it is assumed they are near Beirut or in southern Lebanon, and there is even some disagreement about the number of hostages in Lebanon, Neumann said.

"There are all kinds of hostages (in Lebanon), even Iranian ones," he said, including at least 15 Western hostages, seven of whom are from the United States. Five of the seven are employees of universities in Beirut, and none is a government official. No Western hostages have been taken in the last year because Middle Eastern politics have received little publicity lately, he said.

Polhill's release has helped change that and may also help gather support for Hezbollah, one of two umbrella organizations for Shiite groups in Lebanon, said Christopher Van Hollen, vice president of the Middle East Institute. Hezbollah is more left-wing than Amal, the other major Shiite group, he added.

The Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine released Polhill but still holds two other Americans, and the five other American hostages are held by two other pro-Iranian groups. These two groups are also members of Hezbollah, and they are related to Shiites being held in Kuwait because of terrorist activities in that country, he said.

"The most important development ... is that Syria and Iran hold some influence over the people who are holding hostages in Lebanon," Van Hollen said. This shows an interrelationship among the Shiite groups and offers hope that the two nations may help free

the remaining hostages, he said.

Third parties are important in hostage negotiations because the United States officially does not negotiate with hostage-takers, Neumann said. "But in effect, so many talks directly and indirectly ... are taking place," he said, and "when it comes to a real chance, everyone talks."

Third parties include anyone who seems to have some connections or influence in the Middle East, from governments of nations such as Algeria and Switzerland to individuals Neumann refused to name. "I know some of the (people involved), ... but this is a delicate matter," he said.

The Syrians may have decided to

help free Polhill because of a shift in their relationships with the two superpowers, Neumann said. "The American-Syrian relationships have become better, and the Soviet Union's support for Syria has left."

Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani became involved because he realized Iran's isolation was hurting the country's economy and wanted to gain U.S. support for Iran at the World Bank, Neumann said.

Many in Lebanon also favor freeing the hostages because they are no longer an effective political weapon, he said. Even the religious leader of Hezbollah said the hostages should be released, Neumann said.

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