

September 9, 2006

Sudan Agrees to Free U.S. Reporter Accused of Spying

By Lydia Polgreen

EL FASHER, Sudan — The Sudanese government agreed to release a well-known American journalist, Paul Salopek, and two Chadians who were arrested and charged with espionage and with illegally crossing the border from Chad last month.

The journalist and his colleagues, an interpreter and a driver, were to be released Saturday on “humanitarian grounds,” after Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico met with Sudan’s president, Omar al-Bashir.

Mr. Richardson flew to Sudan on Friday at the invitation of the Sudanese government. Mr. Salopek and his wife, Linda Lynch, have a home in New Mexico.

Mr. Salopek, a foreign correspondent for The Chicago Tribune who has won two Pulitzer Prizes, was detained by a militant group allied to the Sudanese government in the western region of Darfur on Aug. 6. His driver, Idriss Abdulraham Anu, and his interpreter, Suleiman Abakar Moussa, both Chadians, were also detained.

The group turned them over to the government, which charged the men with spying. The arrests came amid tensions over a proposed United Nations peacekeeping force in Darfur that the Sudanese government has refused to accept, despite a Security Council resolution calling for its deployment.

The government has cracked down on protests, and a chill was sent through Sudan’s news media this week with the beheading of a Sudanese newspaper editor who published articles last year about the Prophet Muhammad that some Islamists considered blasphemous.

Mr. Salopek, on a leave of absence from The Tribune, was on assignment for National Geographic magazine, reporting an article about the life, culture and politics of the Sahel, the vast semi-desert belt that spans Africa just below the Sahara.

He had not planned to visit Darfur, where a grim conflict between non-Arab rebels and the Arab-dominated government has left hundreds of thousands of people dead and pushed 2.5 million from their homes. But after reporting along the Chad-Sudan border, he decided to visit a village where some refugees from Darfur were returning and rebuilding their lives.

Mr. Salopek is known for his intense approach to reporting, often asking to work alongside the people he is writing about — fishermen, farmers, laborers, hunters. He once worked at a gas station outside Chicago to report on an article about America’s addiction to oil.

Even while in captivity with the government rebel group last month, he managed to spend a day with village women planting crops, noting how their straight lines of seeds would swerve when one of the women told a joke about sex.

Speaking by telephone soon after learning that he would be freed, Mr. Salopek said he was relieved that he and his colleagues would be able to leave their cell soon.

He said that he planned to continue reporting for the article that he had begun when he was detained, picking up where he left off on a journey of months across Africa.

“I have every intention of resuming this assignment,” he said. “I will be back in Africa.”

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