

## **French Hostage Still Alive**

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Campaigners fighting for the release of Brice Fleutiaux say there is new hope he will soon be returned to his family

A French photographer, taken hostage in Chechnya eight months ago, has been allowed to telephone his family for the first time since his capture.

Brice Fleutiaux called his mother last week from a rebel hideout in the breakaway republic. Clearly traumatised by his harrowing ordeal, the 32-year-old from Toulouse made a desperate appeal for help.

It was clear from the three-minute call that he had no idea of events elsewhere in the warzone or of his exact location.

Meanwhile, Russia's Duma chairman, Gennady Seleznev, has assured European parliamentary leaders that Russian special services have definite proof Fleutiaux is still alive and are "making every effort to ascertain his whereabouts".

Fleutiaux left Toulouse for Ankara in late September 1999 before crossing the border into Chechnya on October 1. He was last seen in Grozny that morning, attempting to make contact with President Aslan Maskhadov.

It is thought the freelance photographer was seized by an armed gang and taken south to a mountain stronghold. The identity of the kidnappers is still unknown and no ransom demand has yet been received.

On October 31, however, the Russian security services were passed a video-tape showing a gaunt, bearded man, who identified himself as Fleutiaux and confirmed he was a French citizen. He said, "I am in a cellar without light, electricity or windows. My captors burst in at any time of day or night and beat me with their weapons. I've been ill for the past week. The conditions are unbearable. Do something quickly."

His family has since received two short hand-written notes as well as a second video-cassette delivered to French investigators in mid-December. Fleutiaux said at the time that his health and living conditions had improved.

Nothing had been heard from the hostage since January 19 and, until this month's phone call, fears were growing for his safety.

The French charity, Reporters Sans Frontieres, has spearheaded the campaign for the photographer's release. Prominent Chechen leaders such as Maskhadov, Shamil Basaev and Ruslan Gelaev have denied all knowledge of the kidnapping, claiming that Fleutiaux is being held on territory "outside their control" and that "the Russian special services took part in his abduction".

In March two French colleagues, Jean Belondrade and Alain Felix, travelled to Moscow to lobby the authorities on Fleutiaux's behalf. Photographic and art exhibitions have been held in France and London in a bid to raise awareness for his ordeal.

Brice Fleutiaux began his career in Cambodia in 1989, reporting on the retreat of the Vietnamese Army. Between 1990 and 1992, he worked for Reuters out of Bangkok, also filing pictures for Cosmos, Vu and Sipa. He has extensively covered the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Romania. His wife, Dana, and four-year-old daughter, Sarah, live in Toulouse.

Fleutiaux is one of an estimated 898 people to have been taken hostage in Chechnya since 1991. Eleven of these are thought to be foreigners.

The kidnapers are often armed gangs who have little or no allegiance to the rebel government. Some hostages, particularly Russian soldiers, have been used for slave labour whilst executions are not uncommon. Earlier this year, rebels shot Itar-Tass photographer Vladimir Yatsina during a forced march through the southern mountains.

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**Location:** Balkans  
Stavropol  
Russia  
North Ossetia

**Focus:** Caucasus

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