

Abductors claim British hostage will be freed

BEIRUT, Lebanon (AP) — Pro-Iranian kidnapers said early Tuesday that within 48 hours they will release British hostage Jack Mann, the oldest of the Western hostages, who was abducted more than two years ago.

The move by the Revolutionary Justice Organization appeared to indicate that a logjam in the complex negotiations by U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar for a comprehensive exchange of Western captives for Arab prisoners held by Israel, and possibly European countries as well, had been broken.

A handwritten communique from the Shiite Muslim group said the decision to free Mann was the result of "immense efforts" by Perez de Cuellar. He has been seeking to negotiate an overall prisoner swap between Israel and its Muslim foes for more than a month.

Tuesday's communique, written in Arabic, was de-

livered a few minutes after midnight to Beirut's An-Nahar daily and a Western news agency in the Lebanese capital.

It was accompanied by an authenticating photograph of American hostage Joseph Cicippio, who is also held by the Revolutionary Justice Organization.

Cicippio, 61, of Norristown, Pa., was kidnapped in Beirut Sept. 12, 1986. The poor-quality photo, the same one the hostage-takers had released before, showed him from the waist up, sporting a bushy beard and without the spectacles he usually wears.

The statement indicated that obstacles in the delicate negotiations to free the Western hostages, which apparently blocked the expected release last week of Mann, 77, had been overcome.

There had been expectations Mann would be freed

after Israel on Sept. 11 released 51 Arab prisoners and the bodies of nine Lebanese Shiite guerrillas killed by the Israelis in south Lebanon.

But Revolutionary Justice claimed Thursday that Israel had reneged on a pledge to release 80 prisoners, and said Israeli intransigence was holding up release of the hostages.

On Tuesday, however, the 33-line communique said: "The United Nations has intervened in the person of the secretary-general and other intermediaries with immense efforts to salvage the situation.

"They sought to narrow the gap and reach solutions satisfactory to all parties," it added.

It did not say who the other intermediaries were. But the statement paid tribute to Syria and Iran for cooperating "to reach these positive results."

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