

One month after grisly discovery

UK admits hostages in Chechnya were asked to report sensitive information

By Mike Ingram
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Reports last week shed new light on the brutal killing of three Britons and a New Zealander in Chechnya at the end of last year. The four engineers, Rudolf Petschi, Stanley Shaw, Daren Hickey and Peter Kennedy, were kidnapped in Grozny in October while working for Granger Telecom installing a mobile communications system.

The horrific fate suffered by the four became known in December, when authorities in the breakaway Russian republic said they had discovered the severed heads of the four on a road near a remote village. British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook described the murders as repugnant and said urgent investigations would be carried out. Subsequent statements focused on the fact that the British Foreign Office gave clear and unambiguous advice not to travel to Chechnya.

There was much speculation that the deaths had resulted from a bungled rescue attempt. Chechnya's president, Aslan Mashkadov, said he believed the kidnappers had been tipped off that security forces were closing in and decided to kill the hostages first.

It now emerges that the British Foreign Office had asked the four telephone engineers to report back sensitive information about the Chechnyan Republic. *The Independent* newspaper reported Wednesday that the Foreign Office asked the hostages for information.

"Despite publicly claiming it had strongly advised the men's employers not to go to Chechnya, correspondence obtained by *The Independent* shows officials were keen to use the company to supply information on investment and politics," the paper said.

This was admitted by the government on Tuesday, but a Foreign Office spokesman said it had done so mainly in a bid to gain information on two other

Britons who were being held hostage in Chechnya at the time. "Despite our strong travel advice, the company had people on the ground and at the same time as expressing our concerns we naturally sought information from any source which might help achieve our aim to obtain the release of Camilla Carr and Jon James."

This claim is refuted by the *Independent* article, which cites a letter written to Granger in October last year in which a Foreign Office official wrote, "As one of the very small number of British companies involved in Chechnya and having first-hand knowledge of Grozny [the capital] we would welcome your views on the potential for investment in Chechnya."

British investment in Chechnya and the surrounding region is substantial. British Petroleum makes up 17 percent of the share in the development of the Caspian Oil Project and another British company, Aramco, make up 2 percent. British Gas is heavily involved in developing the giant Karachaganak natural gas field in Kazakhstan. Foreign deals with Central Asian states that border Chechnya total nearly \$28 billion.

Whatever part concerns for the release of Camilla Carr and Jon James played in the Foreign Office request for information, it is clear from the text of the letter that a far bigger concern was the investment, both present and potential, that Britain has in the region.

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