

Missionary released in Colombia

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Miami—An Australian Missionary, Edward Walter Smith, 51, was released unharmed on May 24 almost two weeks after being kidnapped by Colombian guerrillas.

Relatives 'cried with joy' following his release unharmed, the Age newspaper in Australia reported.

Edward Smith, 51, was released May 24 in the village of El Canito in the Sincelejo province and reunited with his wife Ruth and two daughters, who were also in Colombia.

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs spokesman Matt Francis said Smith appeared to have been looked after reasonably well despite his ordeal.

Francis said the kidnapers had demanded a substantial ransom but none was paid. 'It was made very clear that Smith was a missionary and his family were not in a position to pay a ransom,' he said.

Smith, originally from the Australian state of Queensland, had been captured by guerrillas during a service at his church in northern Colombia along with three Colombian coworkers. The three Colombians were released the same day.

The abductors released Smith in a rural area near the northern town of Carmen de Bolivar.

Smith has worked for 16 years with Australian Missionary Tidings, an organization related to the Brethren Church. He lives with his wife and 23-year-old daughter in Sincelejo.

Smith was in touch with his family several times during the ordeal, leading to speculation that negotiations were underway for a ransom. Police said that no ransom was paid for his release.

His brother Clarence said he believed the building of a new hall, overseen by his brother, may have prompted the guerrillas to think there was "a lot of money" in the village.

"There's a rebel-type guerrilla uprising against the government and they're capturing people for money and clothing for their cause," Clarence said

Family members said they were greatly relieved that Smith had been released.

'We all just about broke down and cried with joy when we heard he was to be released,' Clarence said.

Speaking in Gympie, Queensland, near the family's home town of Imbil, Clarence Smith said the family had been 'very tense' over the kidnapping.

In Brisbane, Smith's son Darren said: 'The family is very happy that it's all over and we thank God.'

Missionary released in Colombia, May 26, 2000