

Keep on truckin'



ALISON COZBY - The Battalion

Senior wildlife and fisheries sciences major **Mike Fry** speaks with senior architecture student **Nick Sirianni** at the Texas A&M Off-Road club display at Rudder Fountain Tuesday afternoon. The club members were out to promote membership and emphasize that it is not necessary to have an off-road vehicle to join.

Seven hostages released 18 are still held captive

By Alexandra Zavis
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Kidnappers released two female Italian aid workers and five other hostages Tuesday, raising hopes for at least 18 foreigners still in captivity. But insurgents showed no sign of easing their blood-soaked campaign against the U.S. presence in Iraq, staging a show of defiance in Samarra and striking twice with deadly force in Basra.

It was unclear what prompted the two separate groups of kidnapers to release the Italians, three Egyptians and two Iraqis, and whether any ransom had been paid. It was the second day in a row that foreigners were freed.

The Italian women were wearing full black veils that revealed only their eyes as they were received by the Italian Red Cross in a Baghdad neighborhood, according to video broadcast by the Arab news station Al-Jazeera.

Looking dazed but smiling, Simona Torretta lifted her veil and repeated, "Thank you," in Arabic. Simona Pari hesitated before also lifting her veil.

Later Tuesday, the two women were flown home aboard a Falcon 20 plane, arriving at a military

airport in Rome shortly after 5 p.m. The two, now in long, white dresses, emerged smiling and holding hands as they walked on the tarmac, their relatives by their side.

Asked by reporters how she felt, Pari just said, "Good."

Pari and Torretta were abducted Sept. 7 in a bold raid on the Baghdad office of their aid agency "Ponte Per ..." ("A Bridge To ..."). Two Iraqis, Raad Ali Aziz and Mahnaz Bassam, were also seen with them Tuesday.

News of the release came after Muslim leader from Italy met with an influential Muslim association in Baghdad on Tuesday to press for their freedom, though it was not immediately known if there was a connection. The two women, who had been working on school and water projects in Iraq.

The Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Ahram had reported Tuesday they could be released by Friday, return for a \$1 million ransom. Al-Arabiya TV, citing unidentified sources involved in the negotiations, said no ransom was paid.

Pope John Paul II, who recently urged that all hostages held in Iraq be freed, expressed "great joy" over the release of the Italian aid workers, the Vatican said.

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