Tuesday, 7 March 2006

Lebanon returns hostage's remains

A plane carrying the remains of a French hostage kidnapped in Lebanon more than 20 years ago has taken off after a ceremony in Beirut.

The body of Michel Seurat, kidnapped in May 1985 by the Lebanese Islamic Jihad Organisation, was found in Beirut in October and identified by DNA analysis.

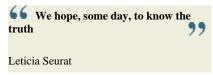Mr Seurat's body was found during excavation work in Beirut last year

The group said it killed him in revenge for France's extradition to Baghdad of two pro-Iranian Iraqi dissidents.

Mr Seurat was one of many Westerners abducted during the Lebanese civil war.

Honour guard

Jean-Paul Kauffmann, the French journalist kidnapped with Mr Seurat just after they had arrived in the Lebanese capital, was among those who attended the brief ceremony at Beirut's police headquarters.

A Lebanese honour guard carried the coffin into the ceremony, where it was formally received by the French ambassador, Bernard Emie.

> ❝ **We hope, some day, to know the truth** ❞
>
> Leticia Seurat

The coffin was then taken to the plane at Beirut airport, where Mr Seurat's widow, Marie, and their two daughters were waiting.

His Syrian-born wife's account of his captivity, Les Corbeaux d'Alep (The Crows of Aleppo), became a best-selling book in France and abroad.

"We hope, some day, to know the truth," Mr Seurat's daughter, Leticia, told reporters at the airport.

Mr Seurat was a Middle East researcher working for the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique when he was kidnapped with Mr Kauffmann on 22 May 1985.

On 3 March 1986, the Islamic Jihad Organisation said it had executed Mr Seurat - but hostages who were later freed said the Frenchman had died either of hepatitis or cancer.

His body was found in October during excavation work on the airport road in Beirut's Shia-dominated southern suburbs.

The group held many other Westerners hostage during the Lebanese civil war, including Anglican Church envoy Terry Waite, who was released in November 1991.