

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez Brokers Release of US Hikers from Iran

Iranian Foreign Ministry confirmed release was in large part due to the mediation efforts of president Chavez

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The Iranian Foreign Ministry has confirmed the release of Joshua Fattal and Shane Bauer was in large part due to the request and mediation efforts of President Chavez

Iran's release of US citizens Joshua Fattal and Shane Bauer on Wednesday, September 21, made headlines worldwide, but little details were initially provided regarding the reasons behind their liberation. The Iranian Foreign Ministry has now publicly affirmed the release of Fattal and Bauer was in response to requests made by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, along with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and the heads of state of Iraq and Oman.

The two US citizens were originally detained on July 31, 2009, along with Sarah Shroud, after they were caught by Iranian border guards who claimed they had entered Iranian territory without authorization. The three young US citizens alleged they were hiking in Iraqi Kurdistan, a touristy area for outdoor activities that borders Iran, and were kidnapped by the Iranian security forces while on Iraqi territory.

They were immediately taken to Tehran and jailed, accused of espionage and illegal entry into the country. After more than a year in detention, Sarah Shroud was released on \$500,000 bail last September 14, 2010, on humanitarian grounds due to a health condition.

The trial against the three US citizens began on February 6, 2011, without the presence of Shroud, who remained in the US with her family, fighting for the release of her two friends, one of whom, Shane, became her fiancé while in prison. On August 20, 2011, Bauer and Fattal were convicted of "illegal entry" and "espionage" by the Iranian court and sentenced to a prison term of 8 years. Spying typically carries a death sentence in Iran.

During the past few weeks, rumors circulated regarding the imminent release of the two "US hikers", as they've been referred to by news media. Their lawyer in Iran, Masoud Shafiei, had announced to the press that despite their 8-year sentence, they would soon be released.

In early September, Iranian President Ahmadinejad affirmed that by unilateral humanitarian gesture, he would request release of Bauer and Fattal, and on September 21, the two left the Iranian prison, where they had been held for more than two years, to finally go home.

VENEZUELA'S ROLE

While the US government failed to facilitate in anyway the release of the three US hikers, Venezuela played a key role. Soon after the initial detention of the hikers, an informal request was made to President Hugo Chavez to intervene on behalf of the three US citizens, based on Venezuela's close ties with Iran. Chavez, who formerly and successfully mediated the release of several hostages held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2007-2008, including several US citizens, agreed to get involved.

Over the past year and a half, Venezuela has played a key role in mediating and negotiating the release of Bauer and Fattal. Pleas were also made directly to President Chavez requesting his involvement in the release of the hikers by US author Noam Chomsky and anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan, along with Oscar-winning actor Sean Penn and other allies of Venezuela.

While Chavez made the request to release Bauer and Fattal directly to President Ahmadinejad, Venezuela's Foreign Ministry dealt with the details of the mediation process for their liberation.

Iran's Foreign Ministry issued a statement a day after the release on Thursday, September 22, confirming the important role Venezuelan President Chavez played in the release of Bauer and Fattal.

"The statement said that after the completion of the judicial processing, the Islamic Republic of Iran released the other two on bail again due to Islamic kindness and affection and in order to show respect for the mediation efforts made by several world leaders, including UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and top authorities of several friendly states like Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, **Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez** and Omani King Sultan Qaboos as well as a number of religious figures, who have all requested their freedom", reported FNA.

According to Venezuelan officials, President Chavez's involvement in mediating the release of Bauer and Fattal was a "pure, humanitarian gesture of solidarity".

Once again, President Chavez has played a major role in assuring the freedom of US citizens imprisoned for different reasons around the world.

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