

GERMAN COURAGE, ITALIAN COWARDICE

By Claude MONIQUET, President of ESISC

Terrorist events of recent days have highlighted a startling contrast: when faced with the same problem, two European capitals, Berlin and Rome, have reacted in diametrically opposite manners. To obtain the liberation of the journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo, Rome has clearly exerted considerable pressure on Kabul in order to bring about the release of five Taliban. In Iraq, two Germans were kidnapped and threatened with death if Berlin did not withdraw its troops from Afghanistan (indeed, this manipulation says much about the existing links between the various theatres of the jihad). The response from Angela Merkel came this Monday: German will not surrender to terrorism. Courage on one side, shame on the other.

For Rome, it gets worse: not only have our Italian friends compromised, but they have also deliberately left the journalist's two Afghan assistants to their fate, and one of them has had his throat cut. This Tuesday, Mr Mastrogiacomo described in his newspaper the death of his driver: *"The leader (Taliban) handed out the sentence of death in the name of Islam. He said that we were all spies and that we were to die... The translator started crying. I didn't understand. I asked him what they said, and he, in tears, declared: 'they are going to kill us'. Four young men grabbed the driver and put his face in the sand. They cut his throat, and continued to separate his head from his body. He could not say a single word. They cleaned the knife on his tunic and attached the separated head to the body; then they took him to the river and threw him in it"*. These words will probably be the only epitaph of a modest man who, to feed his family, accepted to run the risk of being the driver of an "infidel". For this "crime", he was a victim of this barbarism. According to the Italian ambassador in Afghanistan, the journalist is "in good health, in fine physical condition". We are happy for him. We also hope that if this story increases the circulation of *La Repubblica*, the newspaper will have the decency to send some money to the family of the dead man. It is simply quite surprising that *La Repubblica* cannot explain how it will "compensate" the family of the driver, nor the efforts it will go to in order to free the Afghan interpreter of Daniele Mastrogiacomo, who is still in the hands of the murderers. But his fate does not seem to cause too much worry for Rome nor Kabul. After all, it's his fault - not being an Italian...

The Mullah Dadullah, responsible for the hostage taking, declared by telephone that the price of Mr Mastrogiacomo's life was the liberation by Kabul of several Taliban, including one former leader of the regime.

This pitiful situation is worthy of comment.

At some point, and this is said with all due respect to the freedom of the press and those journalists who maintain it - the media and its reporters ought to stop putting themselves in absurdly inextricable situations, leaving the public authorities responsible for getting them out at any price. The Helmand region in which Mr Mastrogiacomo was kidnapped is one of the most dangerous in the country: being unconscious of that fact, at least one man has died.

Rome has set a dangerous precedent by giving in to terrorism. This will encourage hostage taking. What credibility will Italy now have in Afghanistan?

By negotiating the freedom of their only citizen - unless they were hoaxed in addition to being coward and, in this case Italian diplomacy is not professional - the Italians have demonstrated an astonishing contempt towards the Afghans who, each day, help foreigners in their country and for whom we are definitively meant to fight... France, at least, when faced with the same situation in Iraq, had negotiated the freedom of all hostages, including Iraqis.

While Mrs Merkel takes the only path to follow (no negotiation with terrorism), this pitiful affair leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.