

15 August 2008

### **Alan Johnston speaks of his 'vast psychological battle'**

BBC correspondent Alan Johnston spoke at the Edinburgh International Book Festival last night about the 'vast psychological battle' of his 4 months in captivity at the hands of the Army of Islam in Gaza last year – at an event he deemed to be 'probably his last' talking about the subject.

Johnston calmly led the audience through his 4-month ordeal step by step, recalling the turning point in his confinement – access to a radio in the fifth week of his captivity. The first news bulletin he heard reported that the Army of Islam were claiming to have executed him – 'the most shocking thing I hope I will ever hear in my life'.

Johnston revealed how worldwide media campaigns for his freedom, led by his parents, kept him going through '4 months buried alive in the worst corner I could imagine... If you're a kidnap victim, what you fear most is being buried alive while the world forgets about you.' He recalled, smiling, his security advisor's joke prior to the kidnapping: 'There'll be no ransom for you – it's all BBC license payers' money!'

When asked about the post-traumatic effect of his ordeal, he explained the nightmares slowly subsided. 'I feel like I got quite a lot older and lost quite a lot of energy in that room... There was a raft of things I saw...to lose your freedom entirely [was] a dark education'. He quotes John McCarthy – 'It makes you more empathetic' – and Terry Waite: 'The mind and body are remarkable things; you'll find you have more strength than you'd imagined.'

Johnston is embarrassed to be mentioned in the same breath as Waite, McCarthy and Brian Keenan. 'I did 4 months, they did 4 years. I met Brian Keenan and he kindly said "4 minutes is enough with those guys".' Johnston was similarly humble regarding the case of Ingrid Betancourt's 6 years in captivity. 'I was there for 4 months – it was like a long weekend in comparison.'

Describing his first work as a war correspondent in Armenia, in a conflict Johnston likened to the current situation in Georgia, he remembered realising his job was vital: 'In an environment where people kill and are prepared to die, the stories seemed so profoundly worth telling.' He dismissed personal allegiance at the time – 'I'm only here to tell the world what they do to each other' – and continues to do so.

'The Beeb was able to build a narrative around me – I was the one Western correspondent in Palestine, telling the story.' It seems fitting that Johnston's story itself has become, in his words, 'worth telling'.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival is running until Aug 25<sup>th</sup> in Charlotte Square Gardens, Edinburgh. Full details of all events can be found on [www.edbookfest.co.uk](http://www.edbookfest.co.uk)

- ends -

For further information & photographs  
please contact Anna Bacciarelli  
[anna@edbookfest.co.uk](mailto:anna@edbookfest.co.uk) or 0131 718 5639

**FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT ANNA BACCIARELLI, PRESS OFFICER:**

[anna@edbookfest.co.uk](mailto:anna@edbookfest.co.uk) / Tel: 0131 718 5639 / Fax: 0131 226 5335