

Algeria Scouring Sahara for Five Missing Foreigners

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ALGIERS, Algeria (AP) — Algerian forces are scouring the Sahara desert for five foreigners missing since Islamist militants attacked a remote natural gas plant, an official said Tuesday.

An al-Qaida-affiliated band of fighters attacked the vast natural gas complex on Jan. 16, killing 37 hostages, including an Algerian security guard, in a four-day standoff

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that was ended by Algerian special forces.

"Are they dead? Did they attempt to flee the site after the attack like some other expatriates? Are they lost in the desert after taking a wrong turn?" said the official, who is a member of Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal's office. "These are all questions we ask ourselves."

The Ain Amenas gas plant, jointly run by BP, Norway's Statoil and the Algerian state oil company, is located deep in the Sahara, some 800 miles (1,300 kilometers) from the coast, with few population centers nearby.

The desert in the area is flat rocky and featureless and while roasting hot in the summer, during the winter months the mercury drops to 3 C (37 F) at night, with average highs of 18 C (64 F) during the day.



BP said that the operations at the plant are still suspended.

The Algerian official, who spoke on condition of anonymity since he was not authorized to speak to the press, said catering and cleaning services at the remote plant near Libya's border have restarted.

The audacious attack transfixed the world and showed the improved capabilities of al-Qaida-linked groups in the Sahara. Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal said

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29 militants died in the attack and three were captured. He said the group came from northern Mali and included fighters from all over North Africa as well as two Canadians, and managed to sneak across hundreds of miles of desert, across the borders of Libya and Niger before finally entering Algeria.

A group called the Masked Brigade claimed the operation saying it was in retaliation for Algeria's support of a French military operation against extremist groups in northern Mali.

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