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Kidnapped boy home

R1.1m ransom paid, but police fail to intervene

BETTINA CHANG AND NOKUTHULA DLADLA

A RANSOM, stuffed into a backpack and handed over at a restaurant led to the return of a five-year-old boy who was snatched from his Sunday school class this week.

Samuel Amoes, youngest son of Angolan diamond mining magnate Faustino Amoes, was returned to his mother Imaculada yesterday after spending two nights with his alleged kidnappers.

But, while Samuel's family are celebrating his return, questions have been raised about the way the case was handled.

Reuters reports that a ransom of \$150 000 (R1.13m) was set up through a private investigator while the police played an observing role.

Samuel was abducted from a church in Troyeville, Joburg by four armed men on Sunday morning, and the incident was reported to the police that morning. But when the family had no feedback from them, a private investigator was hired.

Samuel's parents were away on a business trip in Angola, so Samuel's nanny, Milano Cockrill, took charge. She spoke to Declan Condon, CEO of private investigators D&K Management Consultants.

"With the parents not there, I was the oldest, I was the adult," Cockrill, 21, said in a tired voice. When she spoke to The Star yesterday, she had not slept in two days.

"I had so many thoughts. What do I do? Where do I start? We looked to Declan, who gave us some sound advice at a difficult time."

On Monday, an envelope was dropped off at the family's house in Bedfordview when a metered taxi drove up. Samuel's sister, Africa, and a family friend, Gugu Dube, ran to the gate and Africa snapped photos with her cellphone. Inside the envelope was a letter containing a phone number instructing the family to contact them.

At first it seemed like the kidnappers were just fooling. They called twice, and the line went to voicemail. A few hours later, a man speaking in English and Zulu phoned Africa. He said they would return the child in exchange for sex, and then the line went dead.

Other calls seemed to tease the family, asking why the



HOME AGAIN: Samuel Amoes, 5, reunites with his mother Imaculada after being kidnapped in Troyeville, Joburg.

PICTURE: DUMISANI SIBEKO

daughter was on the phone instead of the mother. Finally, the man called again and asked for an amount of money, paid in cash.

He said they were not playing around. They cared only about the money, he said, so the child would not be harmed as long as they paid up.

The next morning, the kidnappers arranged to meet the family to make the exchange.

They dealt with Sammy's uncle, Felix Jacobs, and Dube, who impersonated Africa.

The kidnappers demanded that the police not be involved. And Imaculada agreed.

But Condon arranged for the police to observe the hand-over from a distance, "just in case". They met at a Spar near the church where Sammy was abducted.

A man approached them and told them to go to a restaurant in the shopping complex. Gugu had the money in a backpack.

She handed it to him, and he told them that another man

would bring Sammy.

"You should go in and relax and get a drink," he said.

The two watched him walk across the street with the money. Ten minutes later, a different man came towards them, with Samuel.

When Sammy, Gugu and Felix arrived back at the family's home, Sammy was sitting on Gugu's lap.

She passed him quickly into Imaculada's arms. As she held him, Sammy turned to Milano. Imaculada, who arrived

back in Joburg without her husband on Monday evening, said: "It's a miracle... I lost hope in my own power to help him, but I put my hope in God."

Her husband is in hospital in Angola with high blood pressure after hearing about the kidnapping.

Condon and police officials said they were pursuing several leads to find the kidnappers, but they had made no arrests and could not release any information, for fear of

jeopardising the investigation.

Hillbrow police spokeswoman Captain Cynthia Magoai would not say why the police did not pursue the man who handed over the child.

Provincial police spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Lungelo Dlamini said: "Kidnappings for ransom in the country is not common. In a case like this, they knew that their target was someone who could pay." - Additional reporting by Reuters