NEWS LESSON

A Message from the Man Who Held Him Hostage



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What makes a story about a real person stay with you?
2. Can you understand someone's actions without forgiving them?
3. When does replying to an unwanted message make things harder?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**captivity**	☐	A	a person who is accused of a crime in court
2	**hijacked**	☐	B	taken by force by criminals
3	**federal**	☐	C	money paid to free a prisoner
4	**prosecutors**	☐	D	the state of being held as a prisoner
5	**defendant**	☐	E	lawyers who try to prove that someone is guilty
6	**ransom**	☐	F	to do with the national government, not a local one
7	**accountability**	☐	G	stopping being angry with someone who did wrong
8	**forgiveness**	☐	H	being responsible for what you did and having to explain it

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Michael Scott Moore went on replying to his former guard, then told the FBI. Federal agents were waiting when Mohamed Tahlil arrived in New York.

1 Imagine receiving a Facebook message from someone who had helped keep you prisoner for almost three years. Would you delete it, report it to the police or reply? American journalist Michael Scott Moore faced that decision in late 2014, just two months after being released from captivity in Somalia. The message came from Mohamed Tahlil, a man Moore remembered as one of his less aggressive guards. Tahlil greeted him almost as an old friend. After everything he had suffered, Moore found that friendliness difficult to believe.

2 Moore had travelled to Somalia in January 2012 to investigate piracy and its effects on the region. Soon afterwards, armed men kidnapped him. Over the next 977 days he was moved between makeshift prisons, outdoor camps and a hijacked fishing vessel. He endured isolation, fear and violence, often kept in the dark about when, or whether, he would see his family again. Early on, Tahlil had seemed comparatively gentle, teaching Moore Somali words and presenting himself as different from other guards. Moore doubted how genuine this kindness was.

3 After his release in September 2014, Moore wanted to understand what had happened. Rather than immediately cutting off contact, he began exchanging messages with Tahlil. The conversations supplied details that helped him research The Desert and the Sea, his book about captivity. Yet Tahlil had his own reasons for staying in touch. Tahlil told Moore that he was frightened in Somalia and wanted to find a way to reach the United States. Moore told the FBI, the American federal agency that was already investigating the kidnapping. Eventually he agreed to help set up an operation to bring Tahlil to the United States.

4 In August 2018, Tahlil arrived in New York expecting a new opportunity. Federal agents arrested him instead. At first, Moore felt uneasy about having played a part in the arrest. He had sometimes seen Tahlil as a minor figure, rather than one of the people responsible for organising the violence. Later court evidence turned out to tell a different story. Prosecutors presented Tahlil as a more influential participant who had controlled weapons used by the pirate group. Another defendant, Abdi Yusuf Hassan, was linked to the operation and its ransom demands.

5 Both men were convicted in 2023 of serious crimes connected with the kidnapping and were sentenced to 30 years in prison in 2024. Moore supported accountability, but the outcome did not bring him the simple satisfaction outsiders might expect. He questioned whether every offender deserved the same punishment and whether a courtroom could provide the peace that years of captivity had taken from him. His views had changed, but questions about forgiveness remained.

6 The experience raises an uncomfortable distinction. Forgiving someone does not require forgetting what they did or protecting them from the consequences. For Moore, trying to let go of hatred had helped him survive long before the trials began. Justice was a public process involving judges and evidence; recovery was far more personal. The strange Facebook message connected those two worlds, but could not offer an easy ending to either.

Sources: The Guardian. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. One of the guards taught Moore a few Somali words. T F NG
2. Court evidence connected a second man to the ransom demands. T F NG
3. Moore kept the Facebook messages secret from the FBI. T F NG
4. Moore's book became a bestseller. T F NG
5. The court evidence changed how Moore saw Tahlil's part in the kidnapping. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

comparatively	convicted	demanded	endured	genuine	reluctantly	supplied	uneasy

1. The workers _____ months of low pay before the company finally listened.
2. The flat was _____ cheap for the area, though it still cost a lot.
3. She seemed so friendly that nobody doubted her kindness was _____ .
4. The witness _____ the police with several useful details.
5. I felt _____ about walking home alone through the empty car park.
6. Once a court has _____ someone, they can still appeal against the decision.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. By the time Tahlil wrote, Moore _____ free for two months. (BE)
2. Over those 977 days, he _____ in several different places. (HOLD)
3. Tahlil _____ a new opportunity when he flew to New York. (EXPECT)
4. If the guard _____ that friendly message, the FBI operation would never have begun. (NOT SEND)
5. Writers _____ for centuries about whether some acts can ever be forgiven. (ARGUE)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Pay attention to the verb that goes with each noun. Another verb may sound fine but is not the natural choice.

do	impose	pay	reached	shed	stage	wear

1. After two weeks, the jury finally _____ a verdict.
2. The judge may _____ a heavy sentence on anyone found guilty of kidnapping.
3. A good journalist tries to _____ light on stories that others ignore.
4. Could you _____ me a favour and read this message before I reply?
5. Few families can afford to _____ a ransom of millions of dollars.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Should someone who has suffered a crime feel any pressure to forgive?
2. What do journalists owe people when they retell a painful story?
3. Can a court judgment give a story a clear ending?

9 Role-play: should I reply?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the person who got the message

An old classmate who treated you badly has sent you a friendly message after many years. You are curious and want to reply. Explain why, and say what worries you.

Student B · the friend

You think your friend should be careful. Ask questions, give your opinion, and suggest what to do. You can say reply, ignore it, or reply with conditions.

Useful phrases

I've just had a message from someone I haven't heard from for years.

Part of me wants to find out why they wrote.

I'd think twice before answering.

What if they're only after something?

Maybe you could reply, but keep it short.

I'm still angry, but I don't want to be bitter.

Afterwards, tell the class: what did your pair decide, and why?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 D · 2 B · 3 F · 4 E · 5 A · 6 C · 7 H · 8 G

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 T · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 endured · 2 comparatively · 3 genuine · 4 supplied · 5 uneasy · 6 convicted

6 Verb forms

1 had been · 2 was held · 3 was expecting or expected · 4 hadn't sent or had not sent · 5 have argued or have been arguing

7 Language focus

1 reached · 2 impose · 3 shed · 4 do · 5 pay

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