

Madeleine's parents cling to hope of safe return for their missing toddler

By Ian Herbert in Praia da Luz

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The parents of Madeleine McCann said last night that they still hold out hopes for her safe return, with Portuguese police apparently no closer to finding the three-year-old a week on from her abduction.

Gerry and Kate McCann were unable to face the cameras yesterday but in a statement said they continued to remain positive. "We are grateful to all of those currently taking part in the search for our daughter Madeleine," they said. "At present, we are channelling all of our emotions and all of our efforts into the steps that are being taken to secure Madeleine's safe return."

Clues to Madeleine's disappearance - she went missing from an apartment in the Algarve resort of Praia da Luz while her parents dined in a nearby tapas bar - seemed few and far between yesterday. An e-fit of the "abductor" shown by police to local businesses was little more than a crude outline of a long oval face with hair but no facial features.

Detective Chief Inspector Graham Hill, from Britain's Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), one of only two centres of excellence for child abduction and paedophile behaviour in the world, continued to work with the Portuguese yesterday. His colleague, the forensic psychologist Joe Sullivan, has already returned to Britain to fulfil previous commitments but will continue to work on the case.

After identifying the failure to circulate images of Madeleine as a weakness of the investigation, the CEOP also issued an internet appeal for Madeleine's safe return yesterday. It came through the Virtual Global Taskforce (VGT), which receives hits from more than 130 countries.

It also came to light yesterday that the Portuguese police have included a photograph of Madeleine and a telephone number for the public to call on its own website but had failed to draw attention to the site or to make the number available at its press conferences.

David Hill, a former area commander of the National Crime Squad who was awarded the Queen's Police Medal for helping write the police response procedures for kidnap scenarios - and was involved in the hunt for missing teenager Milly Dowler in 2002 - said the Portuguese response had been "apathetic".

Stung by criticism of their efforts, Portuguese police adopted a higher profile yesterday, with mounted officers and maritime patrols among the search teams.

Officers have been passed a CCTV tape from a service station a few miles from where Madeleine was abducted, showing a woman with a girl fitting her description who raised staff suspicions. The woman was said to be urging the girl to say "thank you" to staff but apparently wanted to say something else. Police have said no more about the tape.

They are said to focusing their search on the possibility Madeleine was abducted by an organised paedophile network. But the investigative Policia Judiciaria (PJ) have not commented publicly. The force has come under intense criticism for its handling of the case but refuses to reveal details of the investigation because of the national segredo de justica law which prevents details of a criminal investigation being revealed.

Madeleine's uncle, John McCann, just back from Portugal, stepped in to defuse criticism. "Everybody's working to the same end," he said.

The Prime Minister's spokesman indicated Tony Blair was following the case. "These are very difficult days for... the family, and we clearly understand that and appreciate that," he said. "We have a certain level of expertise which has been made available and has been taken advantage of by the Portuguese authorities."