

# British toddler abducted, police believe

Detectives investigating the disappearance of British girl Madeleine McCann believe she was abducted, Portuguese police revealed today.

Portugal's Judicial Police - the equivalent of Britain's CID - also said they believe that the three-year-old is still alive.

Experts have put together a sketch of a suspect, but no further details were revealed for fear of endangering the Leicester youngster's life.

Madeleine went missing from her family's rented holiday apartment in the Algarve village of Praia Da Luz on Thursday night while her parents, Gerry and Kate, were eating their dinner less than a minute's walk away.

The couple had been making regular trips back to the apartment from a tapas restaurant opposite to check on Madeleine and their twin son and daughter.

Police at first launched a missing person hunt, but revealed today that it was now a kidnapping investigation.

Many elements pointed to an abduction, Guilhermino Encarnacao, director of the Judicial Police in the Faro region, said. Speaking to reporters in the town of Portaimao, he revealed that police had what he described as a suspect.

Asked what he believed the motive might be, he said that in Portugal, according to the law, "kidnapping" could mean either abducting someone for a ransom or for sexual motives.

He said police believe Madeleine is still alive and still in Portugal, possibly even still in the Algarve and added that airports in both Portugal and neighbouring Spain had been alerted.

Yesterday the police received more than 30 calls with possible new lines of inquiry, all of which were being followed up, while calls have flooded in today from all over Portugal from members of the public reporting possible sightings of a girl matching Madeleine's description.

Asked about reports that one man had claimed to have seen a child with two people, Mr Encarnacao said this was one of the many pieces of information they were investigating.

He would not go into what specific evidence there was to point to an abduction other than to say that "many elements" suggested that was the case.

It is not clear whether this means that police are looking for a specific, named individual, or simply someone fitting a description.

The three-year-old's great uncle, Brian Kennedy, speaking after the police made their announcement, said: "It's a strain. We fear the worst but we are hoping for the best."

He added that he was in contact with Madeleine's parents, Gerry and Kate, and their wider family in Portugal by phone and through text message and revealed that the family were receiving support from church ministers in Portugal.

"As far as we know the attention the family have been receiving from the local police and church has been very helpful. It is just a very difficult time. You lose a child for a few minutes and you worry about them.

Mr Kennedy insisted that Mr and Mrs McCann had acted responsibly when they left the children in the room as they had dinner at a nearby restaurant.

"The children were left only in the sense that when you put your children to bed you don't stay in the room all night. They had dinner in a restaurant in the complex, only a very short distance away from where the children were, and they kept popping back to check on them, as most parents would.

"They are highly responsible parents who are devoted to their family. I can only imagine what they are like at the moment."