

IRAQI WHO INITIATED LYNCH RESCUE VISITS W.VA.

Seeing POW struck 'cut my heart,' lawyer tells locals

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"Muslims are not guaranteed salvation — they must work hard to earn it," Mohammed Jamal Daoudi, imam of the Islamic Association of West Virginia, told those attending an afternoon prayer service Friday at the South Charleston Islamic Center. "We must gather good deeds if we are to release ourselves from hellfire."

One of the nation's best-known doers of good deeds was among the faithful hearing Daoudi's message.

Mohammed Odeh al-Rehaief, the Iraqi lawyer credited with giving U.S. Marines the information needed to rescue U.S. Army Pfc. Jessica Lynch from Saddam Hospital in Nasiriyah, is in the ex-POW's home state for a series of appearances arranged by the Friends of Mohammed organization.

The Friends of Mohammed was formed by a group of West Virginians led by James Thibeault of Malden to honor the spirit of compassion displayed by the Iraqi lawyer in helping bring about Lynch's rescue.

On Friday, al-Rehaief spoke at the University of Charleston, visited Malden Elementary School and took part in prayer services and a reception at the Islamic Center.

On Monday, he is scheduled to visit Wirt County, where Lynch was born and raised and is now recuperating from her wounds, but there are no immediate plans to meet with the former supply clerk.

According to Lynch family spokesman Stephen Goodwin, the ex-POW "is deeply thankful to Mohammed and other Iraqis who helped her in her hour of need. She looks forward to a private meeting with him in the near future."

Lynch continues to undergo physical therapy several days a week for multiple bone fractures, and is busy dealing with details related to the upcoming release of her book and an in-depth interview with ABC's Diane Sawyer.

Al-Rehaief's actions on behalf of Lynch were in keeping with Islamic teachings, Daoudi told those attending Friday's prayer service.

"The preaching of the Prophet was to avoid hurting prisoners of war," the imam said. "The Quran mentions clearly there are two choices: Either free them or exchange them."

Muslims also are taught to care for "the needy, the orphaned and the captives," Daoudi said. The tenets of his faith that emphasize compassion, the imam said, "are not often highlighted in the media," which serves to widen the gap between Christians, Muslims and Jews.

During his appearance at the University of Charleston, al-Rehaief gave a detailed account of his efforts to bring about Lynch's rescue.

As a boy, he said, he was taught to respect all life. When a snake was found in his house, he refused to kill it, he said, choosing instead to release it in the desert, since he was brought up to believe "that all life is precious."

Although an uncle was active in Saddam Hussein's Baath political party, his immediate family did not support the party, the Iraqi lawyer said. That lack of party membership led to the denial of a needed kidney transplant for his mother, he said. It also led to the harvesting of a lung from his young daughter, who suffered respiratory problems

caused by inhaling a pistachio shell fragment, but was diagnosed as having tuberculosis, he said, so that her lung could be implanted in the daughter of a Baath party official.

He attributed his lack of Baath party loyalty with not being given a job in Iraq's state department, even though he studied international law.

Al-Rehaief said his 5-foot-6-inch frame played a role in a decision to study kung fu, a martial art of which he eventually became a master, earning a black belt and a national championship. He eventually opened a gym in which the martial art was taught, earning him several times the salary he brought home as a lawyer.

As coalition forces poured into Iraq and through Nasiriyah, supported by numerous airstrikes, al-Rehaief drove to Saddam Hospital, where his wife worked as a nurse in the kidney-dialysis unit.

"It was too dangerous," he said. "There were so many bombs. I wanted to take her home."

At the hospital, he heard a rumor that a "very special person," presumably a Baath Party official, was being kept in one room at the hospital, where Ali Hassan al-Majid, the Saddam cousin also known as "Chemical Ali" sometimes based his operations.

After speaking with a sister-in-law, who was a doctor in the hospital, he learned that the "special person" was rumored to be a prisoner of war.

Al-Rehaief said he sneaked into an adjoining room and, through a crack in the door, saw a Fedayeen Saddam militiaman, accompanied by a translator and transcriber, slapping a young female prisoner of war full-strength across her face.

"It cut my heart," he said. "I tried to forget what I saw, but I couldn't. I think about my daughter and what I would want to be done" if someone saw her being similarly mistreated.

Without first discussing his decision with his wife, he crossed to coalition lines and told U.S. Marines about a female American's presence in the hospital.

They asked him to return to the hospital, and bring back detailed information about its layout and the number of sentries and how they were armed.

When he returned, he learned that an informant had spotted him leaving, and that militiamen had detained his wife and daughter. A mullah who lived next door convinced the soldiers to place them in his care, with the understanding that he would arrange to have all three placed in their custody should al-Rehaief return.

The mullah, a friend of the family's, let the mother and daughter go to a relative's home. Al-Rehaief said the mullah was later killed, along with two women who accompanied him.

When the lawyer returned to his home, he said he found it occupied by a pair of Baath Party loyalists seeking a 15-million-dinar reward for apprehending an informant. He said he put his kung fu skills to work to make a getaway, and returned to the hospital, where a guard struck him with a pistol butt when he appeared too interested in who occupied Lynch's room.

After jotting numbers on his knuckles to keep track of the number of guards and their locations, al-Rehaief had a confrontation with another guard and a made a break for the Marines' position in his family Volvo, a car full of militiamen in hot pursuit, guns blazing through a passenger window.

He crossed a bridge leading to the Marine base as the bridge was being targeted in an airstrike. One bomb disabled his car, forcing him to crash into a wall, and left fragments of shrapnel in one eye, rendering it permanently blind. But the car that had been pursuing him was destroyed in the airstrike, allowing him to reach the American troops.

“I think God helped me,” al-Rehaief said.

“Thank you so much,” said Joe Sims of Lynch’s hometown of Palestine, embracing al-Rehaief tearfully at the end of his talk.

Sims, who went to school with Lynch’s grandparents, said he was grateful al-Rehaief “has so much love in his heart.”

Al-Rehaief had equally pleasant things to say about West Virginia and its people.

“I was told that I would be in ‘Almost Heaven’ when I came to West Virginia,” he said. “But this is not almost heaven, this is heaven, and all of you are angels. I’m very happy to be here.”

Al-Rehaief’s wife and daughter accompanied him on his visit.

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