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Nashville, Tennessee

DEC 03 2001

(01-95)

November 19, 2001

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American detainees released from prison in Afghanistan

By John Hall

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- U.S. special-forces helicopters rescued eight international aid workers -- including two graduates of Baylor University -- who had been detained for more than three months in Kabul, Afghanistan.

After the Nov. 14 rescue, the international aid workers were reunited with family members in Islamabad, Pakistan.

In the first of a series of events that one of the American detainees deemed "better than any Hollywood movie," the workers were freed from a container in Ghazni, a town southwest of Kabul, by anti-Taliban forces.

The prisoners were welcomed with hugs from the local people, according to a New York Times report. U.S. troops, who reportedly had been notified of the release by anti-Taliban forces on the ground, then found the group in a field about 50 miles southwest of Kabul.

When the anticipated helicopters did not arrive at first, the women in the group gave an identifying signal amid the darkness by removing their headscarves and lighting them into a fire.

Baylor graduates Dayna Curry, 30, and Heather Mercer, 24, were reported to be healthy upon their arrival in Pakistan.

News of their release came just in time for a Wednesday night service at Antioch Community Church in Waco, Texas, where the two women are members.

The news also broke just minutes before a Baylor University reception for more than 100 international journalists working on the Waco campus to cover a meeting between President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin. While Putin was visiting the Bush ranch near Crawford, the U.S. State Department had established a media center at Baylor's McLane Student Life Center.

The timing of the events thrust the Texas Baptist school into the international spotlight in an unexpected way, with media outlets including Taas and Al Jazeera interviewing President Robert Sloan about why the Christian faith would motivate two young university graduates to work in Afghanistan.

The women were arrested Aug. 3 in Kabul and apparently charged with giving Afghans humanitarian supplies in exchange for conversion to Christianity. Conversion by Muslims was not allowed in Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

The dramatic rescue came two days after the Northern Alliance seized Kabul and Taliban forces retreated. It also followed by less than a week reports that the Taliban had indefinitely suspended the aid workers' trial.

According to various press accounts, Taliban officials had taken the detainees with them as they fled Kabul, placing them in a locked steel container. Mercer and Curry's pastor in Waco, Jimmy Seibert, confirmed the story.

German detainee Georg Taubmann told the New York Times they had been taken out of the capital city by retreating Taliban forces heading toward their stronghold of Kandahar.

"Just before Kabul fell, we were so excited to get out, we heard already that troops were coming in," he told the Times. "And then the Taliban came in and took us away, took us in vehicles and wanted to take us to Kandahar, and we knew that if we ended up in Kandahar we would probably not survive there."

Upon arrival in Ghazni, about 50 miles southwest of Kabul, the detainees were locked in a metal container for the night.

The next morning, Tuesday, they were moved to a Ghazni jail, Taubmann said. He called it a "terrible place."

They arrived at the jail about 9 a.m., just as an anti-Taliban attack on the city began. Within an hour, there was an anti-Taliban uprising in the town. And within two hours, Northern Alliance forces flung open the prison doors, Taubmann told the Times, adding that the aid workers initially feared it was the Taliban coming back to get them.

President Bush expressed pride in the way the military handled the operation and said he looked forward to speaking with the two Americans and their families once they return to the United States.

"I'm really proud of our armed forces, and I'm also thankful for the folks in Afghanistan who helped with this rescue," Bush said. "There have been a lot of people praying for the eight innocent folks. [It's] particularly interesting for me, since I'm here in Crawford and the two Americans were from Waco. And I know a lot of the Waco citizens have been in deep prayer that they be rescued, and their prayers were answered."

Members of Antioch Church, who had conducted an around-the-clock prayer vigil since the women were arrested, exuded excitement when they heard the news. They held a two-hour praise and worship service during which some members yelled praises to God, others danced in joy and others cried in their exuberance.

"We are thankful for a God who answers prayer and for all those who prayed for them," said Pastor Seibert.

At the same time, Baylor President Sloan was addressing the international media, where he said.

"The entire Baylor family rejoices with Heather and Dayna, their families and the scores of Christians -- including Baylor students, alumni, faculty and staff -- around the world who have been praying for their release," Sloan said. "We are thankful those prayers have been answered and that Heather and Dayna are being reunited with their families. We look forward to welcoming them back to Waco soon."

Seibert said he would fly Nov. 15 to meet the women in Islamabad. He said the women would go through a debriefing process in central Europe and meet with a series of counselors to discuss what happened in Afghanistan during their detainment. They were then expected to travel to their hometowns shortly after Thanksgiving and then to Waco.

Seibert said the Americans are unaware of the worldwide exposure their detainment received and have remained "just simple people who love Jesus."

Seibert said he believes their situation has done much more than focus Americans' attention on the two women.

"It raised the awareness of the need for prayer for missionaries around the world," he said. "It raised our awareness of a need for a savior -- a need for a stand."

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-- John Hall is a staff writer for the Baptist Standard.

Freed aid workers hold news conference in freedom

By John Hall

WACO, Texas (ABP) --- Fighting back tears, two Baylor University graduates thanked God for pulling them through their more than three-month detainment by Afghanistan's Taliban government and described a series of Hollywood-style events that led to their rescue at a Nov. 16 news conference in Islamabad, Pakistan.

"Thank you to everyone who has been in there with us," said Heather Mercer, 24, who, like her American companion, Dayna Curry, 30, looked healthy. "Even if we had a whole lifetime to say thank you, I don't think it would be adequate."

The former detainees were working for Shelter Now International, a German-based humanitarian aid group, when Taliban officials arrested them Aug. 3. They, along with six other Shelter Now International workers and 16 Afghans, reportedly were charged with attempting to convert Muslims to Christianity. The 16 Afghans also have been freed.

Curry said she was "flabbergasted" by the charges, which she called "80 percent" false. She acknowledged giving a book that contained stories about Jesus to an Afghan family but said she used the book to teach Afghans how to read. She also said she showed the family part of the "Jesus" video, which has been distributed worldwide by several denominational groups, including Baptists.

The former detainees said their faith in God sustained them through sleepless nights of bombing in Kabul.

God "never left me," Mercer said. "The moments I was most afraid, he was with me. I slept under the bed during the bombings, and he stayed with me."

After several delays in their trial following terrorist attacks in the United States Sept. 11 and the ensuing military action in Afghanistan by a U.S.-led coalition, the women said the last few days contained both the most frightening and most joyous times of their lives.

On Nov. 13, when the anti-Taliban forces began to seize the capital city of Kabul, where the women were held, Taliban officials removed the prisoners from their cells, Curry said. The detainees then watched Taliban forces run by them in full retreat as they rode on top of a rocket launcher toward Kandahar. Along the journey, Curry said Taliban officials told the internationals they should write to their families requesting money to ransom them out of the country.

Despite their fears, Curry said, the group remained calm during the journey, singing, laughing and reading Scripture.

Taliban officials then put them in a steel shipping container, said Curry, where she tried to keep warm by curling into a fetal position. The detainees then were taken to a prison in Ghazni, a town about 50 miles southwest of Kabul, where they again felt the bombings they had become accustomed to in Kabul, Mercer said. She said the group began a prayer meeting and saw the Taliban troops fleeing the city.

The detainees then feared the worst when they heard a group of troops trying to get into the jail, Mercer said. Rather than being greeted by gunfire, however, the group heard shouts of: "You're free! You're free! The city's free! The Taliban are gone!"

According to Mercer, once the fighting ended, a celebration ensued as men shaved their Taliban-mandated beards and women removed their head coverings. She said the detainees took a hike through the city with a military escort to take in what had occurred. The freed detainees then spent some time in an Afghan home before completing what Mercer called a "very complicated, difficult process" that involved several last-minute cancellations before they attempted to meet a military escort out of the country.

Trying to avoid being seen, troops escorted the detainees to a field outside Ghazni, where they were to meet a helicopter that would take them to Pakistan, Mercer said. In order to help the pilots land in the dark, members of the group made a pile of their head coverings and lit them on fire to signal their location.

"It was the most amazing thing I've ever seen," Mercer said, "to be taken prisoner by one government and to walk out of prison a free person with another government."

The detainees were flown to Islamabad, where they hugged and spoke to family members who had been in constant communication with the U.S. State Department throughout their ordeal. Curry's mother, Mary Cassell, and Mercer's father, John Mercer, fought back tears as they described the "wonderful" moment of seeing their daughters again.

Despite their detainment, neither American said she held any animosity toward either the Taliban or the Afghan people. Curry said the Taliban treated them as well as they could have under the circumstances and even said some of the officials loved them like sisters and encouraged them to pray and sing to God.

The women said they hoped their detainment would help the Afghan people and did not rule out a personal involvement in the country after a debriefing in central Europe and some time in the United States.

"We believe because we were there Afghanistan has received so much more attention, which is what they need," Curry said. "They need prayer; they need a miracle."

"In so many ways, because our hearts are there, Afghanistan has become our home," Mercer said. "We want to help Afghans in any way possible."

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Congress passes resolution encouraging school prayer

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A non-binding resolution by the U.S. House of Representatives has sparked a debate over school prayer.

Critics said the Nov. 15 resolution endorses government-sponsored prayers in public schools, which the Supreme Court has ruled unconstitutional. Supporters countered that it simply encourages schools to allow students to pray voluntarily, a practice recently upheld by the high court.

The resolution passed on a vote of 297-125, with three Republicans voting in opposition and 84 Democrats in support. The House suspended its own rules to pass the resolution without first sending it through the usual committee process.

House Concurrent Resolution 239 stipulates that "schools in the United States should set aside a sufficient period of time to allow children to pray for, or quietly reflect on behalf of, the nation during this time of struggle against the forces of international terrorism."

Walter Jones (R-N.C.), a freshman Congressman closely identified with the Religious Right, sponsored the resolution.

Religious-liberty groups quickly denounced the resolution. Americans United for Separation of Church and State called it "divisive" and accused Congress of giving bad legal advice. The Supreme Court has said public schools -- because they act as agents of the government -- may neither prevent nor promote student prayer.

In lively debate on the House floor Nov. 13, proponents of the measure contended that critics' fears were misdirected.

"[T]his resolution encourages and does not require the schools of America to set aside a sufficient period of time for children in America to pray for or reflect on our nation," said Rep. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.).

The resolution does not carry the force of law but expresses the "sense of Congress" on the issue.

Proponents also noted that the language of the resolution endorses not only prayer, but also secular forms of "meditation" or "reflection."

The Supreme Court recently upheld a Virginia law allowing a voluntary "moment of silence" in public schools. Earlier court decisions said moment-of-silence laws are permissible as long as they have a secular purpose and do not prescribe prayer or a particular kind of meditation.

Opponents of the House resolution, however, said the measure goes beyond what the Supreme Court has ruled constitutional.

"I am afraid that the resolution is really about, once again, trying to introduce some form of content or prayer into the schools under the guise of the tragedies of September 11 and the events that have occurred since then," said Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.). "We should really not do that."

While some supporters said the resolution did not unconstitutionally endorse Christian prayers, the measure's sponsor said religious convictions prompted him to author the resolution.

"This nation was founded on Judeo-Christian principles," Jones said.

"Whether people like it or not, before Madelyn Murray [O'Hair] they prayed in the schools," he said in reference to the atheist activist who succeeded in getting voiced prayer and Bible reading in schools banned in the 1960s.

"It is coming back, whether we like it or not," Jones said.

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Education bill ties funds to prayers, Boy Scouts

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Public school districts that unlawfully restrict student prayer or deny equal access to the Boy Scouts will lose federal funding if President Bush signs an education bill that has been revised to include such provisions.

A Congressional conference committee working to present a final version of the education bill to Bush has approved language that, for the first time ever, ties federal education funds to whether a school district complies with U.S. Department of Education guidelines on student-led prayer in schools.

Language approved by the committee also denies federal funding to school districts that do not allow the Boy Scouts equal access to school facilities for meetings.

The Supreme Court has ruled that the First Amendment prohibits state-sponsored school prayer but protects voluntary student-led prayer and certain other religious expressions in public schools. The

compromise education bill, adopted by the House-Senate conference committee, would deny funding to any school district that violates Education Department guidelines designed to clarify students' rights to religious expression.

The language regarding Boy Scouts was a compromise from an amendment to the bill -- passed earlier by the Senate on a partisan vote -- that gay-rights groups viewed as discriminatory. The Boy Scouts have been an issue in many school districts since the Supreme Court last year ruled the Scouts are a private organization and thus have a right to discriminate against gays serving in their leadership. In the past year, school districts in several communities have dropped school sponsorship of Boy Scout troops in protest of the Boy Scouts' policies.

Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., sponsored the original Boy Scouts amendment to the Senate version of the education bill. It attempted to deny funds to any school district that denied access to organizations on the basis of their anti-homosexual policies, specifically naming the Boy Scouts as such a group.

Gay-rights groups said Helms' amendment was unnecessary because denying the Scouts equal access to schools for meeting space is already illegal. "[The Boy Scouts] have always had access to schools based on court rulings," said David Smith, spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign.

However, Smith's organization feared that Helms' amendment was unclear enough that it may lead some school districts to believe that they would have their funding withdrawn if they declined to continue sponsoring or promoting Boy Scouts troops.

The compromise language finally passed by the House-Senate committee clarifies that schools will only lose federal funds if they illegally violate the Boy Scouts' rights to have equal access to school buildings for meetings. Therefore, schools may withdraw sponsorship of Boy Scouts groups as an act of protest without endangering their funding.

Still, Smith said, singling out the Boy Scouts in the bill creates "special rights" for the Scouts. He contended that such language "has no place in federal legislation."

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