

Christians Defend Runaway Teen

✖ Christian ministers close to an Ohio teen who ran away to Florida claiming her Muslim parents threatened to kill her for converting from Islam say they have no doubt that Rifqa Bary's allegations are true—despite claims in court Thursday that a Florida police investigation found no evidence to support her fears.

Roger Weeden, an attorney for Bary's mother, Aysha, said a Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) report indicates there is "no evidence out there whatsoever" to corroborate Bary's allegations.

Weeden was prevented from saying anything more because the report has been sealed for 10 days while the attorneys review its findings. He received the report in the middle of Thursday's hearing along with the other attorneys in the case.

Jamal Jivanjee, a convert from Islam himself who befriended Bary when he was a college pastor in Ohio, defended the teen on Friday, saying the 17-year-old feared for her life not only because of her parents' strict religious views but also because she had experienced years of abuse.

"There are reasons that Rifqa feared for her life," he told *Charisma*. "She has gone through tremendous abuse most of her life, and that's what she's stating now. I don't know what evidence there is for it, but I think at some point Rifqa's own testimony ought to be somewhat valid. This is a reputable girl."

He said Bary contacted him after she heard his testimony of becoming a Christian out of a Muslim background. He met her at a coffee shop with his wife and teenage daughter, and they asked her about her faith. Bary told them her parents had no idea she had converted at age 13 and would kill her if they found out.

Jivanjee, who now leads a parachurch ministry in Tennessee called Illuminate, said Bary's comment was not teenage hyperbole. "She believes with all her heart that her life is in danger," he said. "I believe from my own personal judgment sitting there that she has reasons to fear. [Abuse] was a reality for her. She had feared for her life in the past."

He said shortly before Bary went missing on July 19, he and other Christians she met online received an email from the teen. "She was crying out for help," he said.

He said Bary wrote that her parents had learned of her conversion, packed her bags and were planning to take her away. Jivanjee said she told them she was prepared to die and asked them to pray that she would not deny Jesus when her father confronted her.

"It would have been very easy for her to say, I'll be a Muslim and wait a year until she's 18 and then come out with this," he said. "But she was faced with denying Jesus, and she wasn't going to do it."

When her parents reported her missing, he said he was relieved because he knew she had run off.

Egypt-born pastor Shaddy Soliman, who has met with Bary since she arrived in Florida, said he has counseled dozens of adult converts from Islam who were threatened by their relatives and community. "I know of many, many converted Muslims, and all of them face the same problem," said the pastor of Orlando Arabic Church. "They are so threatened by their communities that they could not even speak about their faith publicly."

He believes Bary would face ongoing threats if she returned to Ohio.

Bary's parents deny that they would hurt their daughter and blame her fears on Christians she met online—particularly charismatic pastors Blake and Beverly Lorenz, whom Bary met through a prayer group on Facebook. They took the teen into their home when she arrived in Orlando, Fla., in July. She spent nearly three weeks with the couple before they reported her to the authorities.

The Lorenzes said they had been unaware that she was listed as a missing person in Ohio and contacted the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) when they were alerted. In early August, Bary was placed in an Orlando foster home, where the teen says she wants to remain. The Lorenzes are not being allowed to visit her.

Authorities from Franklin County Children Services said they have no reason to believe Bary would be in danger with her parents. If she were returned to Ohio, they said she could be placed in voluntary foster care while she and her family receive counseling.

FDLE officers spent two weeks investigating Bary's claims, traveling to Ohio for one day. Their report will be made public later this month if no motions are filed to prevent its release.

Bary's attorney, John Stemberger, and her guardian ad litem, Krista Bartholomew, had filed a motion to seal the report a day before Thursday's hearing because the teen was questioned with no attorneys present. A representative from DCF was present during the two hour, 45-minute interview.

The case is now headed to trial during which Florida Circuit Judge Daniel P. Dawson will ultimately decide whether Bary should be returned to Ohio. A pre-trial hearing is scheduled for Sept. 29, and the judge asked all sides to participate in

mediation within the next month. Dawson also issued a gag order prohibiting attorneys from talking to the media about the case.

Attorneys for Bary's parents have accused Stemberger in particular of using the case to attack Islam. On Monday, Stemberger filed documents alleging the Ohio mosque the Bary family attends has ties to terrorist groups, claims the mosque's leader denies.

Christian observers say Bary's case, and the media attention it has received, may be part of God's plan for the teen. If her parents had learned of her faith just a year from now, there likely would have been little uproar.

"It is possible that God wanted to do something through this for the Muslim children," said evangelist Steven Masood, a native of Pakistan whose father tried to kill him after learning of his conversion in 1973. He ultimately fled the predominantly Muslim nation in 1981 after being imprisoned for violating its anti-blasphemy laws, which are punishable by death.

"There are teenagers who are looking seriously at what has happened," Masood added. "[They say], 'If she is doing this, why can't we?' It will bring a lot of honest teenagers out of Islam."

Jivanjee agrees. "I think God wants to elevate her story," he said. "He wants to use it as a wake-up call to other Christians ... and a story of hope for other Muslims. What gave her courage to stand up to her parents has been Jesus. She'd been quiet about her abuse in the past, but she's not quiet about Jesus. It needs to be talked about."