

Teen Convert to Remain in Florida

✖ An Ohio teen who ran away to Florida alleging her Muslim parents threatened to kill her for converting to Christianity will remain in a Florida foster home for at least two more weeks.

Florida Circuit Judge Daniel P. Dawson today decided that Rifqa Bary's case will remain in his state while the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) investigates her claims that she was abused and threatened with death.

Another hearing is scheduled for Sept. 3. Dawson also ordered Bary and her parents to participate in mediation.

Bary, 17, fled to Orlando, Fla., in late July, claiming her father twice threatened her life after learning she had been baptized. She spent three weeks in the home of an Orlando pastor and his wife she met through an online prayer group before being ordered into the custody of the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) on Aug. 10.

Attorneys for Mohamad and Aysha Bary argued that the case should be transferred to Ohio, where their daughter would be placed in state custody until the couple's home was deemed safe. But DCF and attorneys for the teen said there was no evidence an Ohio court would launch an investigation into the girl's claims.

Orlando attorney John Stemberger, who represented the teen today, claims Bary's parents are members of a radical mosque in Ohio with connections to Islamic terrorist groups, which he

said motivated DCF to request that the FDLE launch an investigation.

"Many Muslims are peaceful, respectful citizens, but there is a very real presence, especially in her city, of radical Islam," Stemberger said after the hearing.

In a statement she read before the court, Rifqa Bary said she loved her parents yet still feared for her life. "The past abuse that I've encountered, the only cry from my heart is to have the freedom to worship without being killed," she said.

In a tearful response, Aysha Bary told the court she loved her daughter and needed her back. "I have two sons and I have only one daughter," she said. "I need my daughter back."

Mohamad Bary said he never threatened to kill his daughter and has no problem with her practicing another religion in his home. "There is no compulsion of religion in Islam," he told the court. "She has the freedom to practice whatever religion she likes. I have no problem with that. ... She is my daughter, and I love her."

Despite her parents' appeals, Rifqa Bary declined to see them through DCF-supervised visitations but did ask to spend time with her brothers.

Global Revolution Ministries pastors Blake and Beverly Lorenz, who took Rifqa Bary in when she arrived in Florida, were not at today's hearing. Attorneys for the Barys have accused the couple of brainwashing the teen into thinking her life would be in danger.

Jamal Jivanjee, a Christian convert from Islam, said he and his family met with Rifqa Bary in Ohio roughly a year ago and she told them then that her life would be in jeopardy if her parents learned that she converted to Christianity at age 13.

"It's the reality of her faith, and it's why I think her story

needs to be told," Jivanjee said. "Rifqa mentioned on several occasions that she would be in danger if her family ever found out."

Representatives for the Bary family argue that the case is not about religion.

"This is an issue between a father and his daughter," said Shayan Elahi, a spokesman for the Barys. "It's a family matter. There is no issue of any extremism. There's no such [terrorist link] whatsoever."

Aysha Bary's attorney, Craig McCarthy, agreed, saying the case was a matter of child safety. "That's what we deal with in this courtroom," he said. "People are making this out to be a clash of religions. That's not necessary."

Both McCarthy and Elahi said they did not know if the Barys attended the Noor Islamic Cultural Center, which Stemberger claims has links to al Qaeda operatives. Orlando ABC-affiliate WFTV said FDLE confirmed that the Barys are members of the mosque.

Stemberger said Rifqa Bary's case is about religious freedom. "It's about what religious expression is appropriate and legitimate and what expression is inappropriate and illegitimate," he said. "Everyone should have the right to believe what they want to" without being threatened.

Rifqa Bary is to begin homeschooling next week.