

Teen Says Parents Want to Kill Her for Converting

✖ A teenage girl who converted to Christianity from Islam is at the center of a legal battle over whether she should be returned to her Muslim parents.

Fathima Rifqa Bary, who turned 17 today, says her father twice threatened to kill her after learning she had become a Christian and had been baptized.

Last month, she ran away from her home near Columbus, Ohio, and traveled to Orlando, Fla., where she was taken in by a charismatic couple she met through a prayer group on Facebook.

She is now seeking emancipation from her parents, claiming they would kill her to defend the family's honor if the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) returned her to their custody. In addition to Bary's age, the case is complicated by the fact that she and her family immigrated from Sri Lanka and are not U.S. citizens.

Although Mohamed Bary denies that he threatened to kill his daughter, a juvenile court judge in Orange County today ruled that Bary can remain in Orlando in DCF custody and set a hearing for Aug. 21. Until then, Bary will live in a group home.

Christians who have rallied around the teen say the fight is far from over. "There's a battle still ahead of us," said Rifqa Bary's attorney, Rosa Armesto of the Alliance Defense Fund, a Christian legal group that frequently takes on religious liberty cases. "I guess we won this battle, but there are still other battles and the bigger war."

DCF attorney Karelene Cole-Palmer said the department wants to see Bary's case transferred to Ohio. But Armesto hopes it will

remain in Orlando because she questions how thoroughly Ohio's department of children and families will investigate the charges against Bary's parents.

Shaddy Soliman, an Egypt-born Christian who now pastors Orlando Arabic Church, worries that neither state's juvenile system will understand the danger many Muslims face when they convert to Christianity.

"The system has no understanding about what the Muslim faith is and why they would kill," said Soliman, who co-wrote *Islam and Terrorism* and was asked to testify at today's hearing.

"They're looking at it like any custody case," he added. "The system is not going to fully understand what religious persecution is. All the attorneys that represent the Department of Children and Families, they don't grasp the danger of this girl going back to her family or what it's going to be like for her if she goes back to Sri Lanka."

Soliman said there have been several cases of "honor killings" in the U.S. He pointed to a situation in Houston last year when a Muslim man allegedly killed his two teenage daughters because he disagreed with their dating habits. Earlier this year, a TV station owner in New York was accused of beheading his wife after she filed for divorce.

Soliman said many Muslims believe dying in jihad or killing a person who leaves Islam are the only ways to guarantee they will go to heaven. He added that if the Barys did not punish their daughter for leaving Islam, they could be expelled from their community or killed themselves. "If her family does not [kill her], her extended family [in Sri Lanka] will do it," he said.

Soliman said the Muslim community is rallying around Bary's parents and helping them secure attorneys. He said he and Global Revolution Ministries pastor Blake Lorenz, who with his wife, Beverly, has been caring for Bary since she arrived in

Orlando July 19, plan to help the teen apply for religious asylum so she cannot be sent back to Sri Lanka, where they fear she would be killed.

Soliman said Bary seemed terrified when she saw her father in the courtroom today. "She was shivering and couldn't even walk straight when she saw her dad," he told *Charisma*. "She's somebody who's desperate and crying for her life."

Bary reportedly accepted Christ several years ago after sneaking away from her parents to attend church with a classmate.

"I was risking my life," Bary said of her decision to attend church. "My parents, they would kill me if I did this. But at this point I was ready to die for something worth living for rather than ... having no purpose in life."

Beverly Lorenz said Bary kept her newfound faith hidden from her parents but spoke openly of it online and often asked for "Jesus' power" in a prayer group they both participated in on Facebook. She said Muslims alerted her parents of her conversion after reading her postings on the social networking site.

Bary claims her father threatened to kill her about a month ago after learning she had been baptized by a college-age minister affiliated with the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Mo. She left home on July 19 and went to friend's house before boarding a bus to Florida.

Bary family supporters have accused the Lorenzes of kidnapping the teen. But the couple says they knew her only online until about three weeks ago when Beverly Lorenz says God led her to visit Bary's Facebook page to pray for the teen during one of her weekly "night watches."

Although it was 3 a.m., Lorenz said Bary was online and asked her to call and pray that she would not renounce her faith

when her father confronted her.

When Lorenz heard from Bary again, she says the teen was on a bus to Florida and wanted to know if the couple would help her.

“She jumped on a bus and called us and said I’m running for my life,” Blake Lorenz told *Charisma*. “We didn’t lure her; she did everything on her own.”

Last week, the Lorenzes said they learned that Bary was listed as a missing person in Ohio. They contacted DCF, which took the girl into custody before releasing Bary temporarily into the Lorenzes’ custody on Saturday.

Both the Lorenzes and the Barys are being allowed to visit the teen.

Correction: This story has been changed. It incorrectly stated that pastor Shaddy Soliman converted to Christianity from Islam. He was reared in a Christian home in Egypt but ministers to former Muslims at his church. *Charisma* regrets the error.