

Ministers Still Concerned for Teen Convert's Safety

✖ Christians supporting an Ohio teen who claims her parents threatened to kill her for converting from Islam say they are still concerned about the girl's safety despite a report from Florida investigators saying they found no evidence to back up her allegations.

The ministers, who have met with Rifqa Bary, 17, since she arrived in Florida in late July, say the teenager is fighting a spiritual battle, not merely a legal one. They argue that the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) report, which did not include interviews with members of Ohio's Muslim community, should not be used to discredit her testimony.

"What's behind this is a spirit of deception that is trying to show this girl to be a liar," said Shaddy Soliman, a native of Egypt who is now pastor of Orlando Arabic Church in Florida. "This is a vessel of honor. The Lord is going to raise her up for her generation."

Jamal Jivanjee, a convert from Islam who met Bary a year ago when he was a college pastor in Ohio, agreed.

"I think Christians need to pray and see what's behind all of this," said Jivanjee, who now leads a ministry in Tennessee. "What is her testimony, what is her story, what is she saying? That's what I think Christians need to pay attention to."

The FDLE report said Mohamad and Aysha Bary denied having been violent with their daughter. There were no reports of abuse from her school, no corroboration from her older brother. Her father said he raised his daughter's laptop when he learned of her conversion but thought of breaking it, not attacking her with it.

The Ohio teacher Bary says knew about the alleged abuse refuted her claim. She said she offered to allow the teen to stay in her home while her parents were away because the girl's older brother allegedly was throwing wild parties where there was drinking and the teacher thought the environment unsafe.

The report also suggests that Christians may have played a bigger role in getting Bary to Florida than previously thought. Although Bary claimed she hitchhiked to a Columbus bus station, FDLE officials say Brian Williams, a young minister affiliated with the International House of Prayer who baptized Bary in June, drove her there.

A ticket had been purchased for her from Orlando under a fictitious name, and when the teen arrived in Florida, members of Global Revolution Ministries picked her up and took her to the home of the church's pastors, Blake and Beverly Lorenz. She remained with the couple for more than two weeks before being placed in an Orlando foster home. Investigators said they found no evidence of criminal activity in either Ohio or Florida.

Jivanjee said the findings still don't lead him to believe Bary is safe. "What evidence would you find that an honor killing is going to take place," he said. "I understand that they're in a quandary, but if they looked a little harder than they looked, I think they'd find something."

FDLE officers spent a day in Ohio, but an investigation into Ohio's Islamic community was deemed "inappropriate" because Bary's allegations lacked a "specific identifiable criminal predicate," the report said.

In court documents, Rifqa Bary claims members of the Noor Islamic Center first alerted her father of her conversion and told him to "deal with this matter immediately." Bary's attorney, John Stemberger, has argued that the mosque has ties

to terrorist organizations, a claim its leaders deny.

The FDLE report said checks with local, state and federal law enforcement in Columbus and Orlando revealed no identifiable threat to the teen or her family.

Bary's father told officers that Islam does not punish converts and that "there is no such thing as honor killing," the report said. He said he wanted his daughter to practice Islam while she remained underage and living in his home. But if she returned to Ohio, he said he would allow her to study Christianity. When she became an adult, she could worship as she pleased.

The fact that this drama unfolded before Bary became an adult is partly what has Soliman and Jivanjee alarmed. "They're refusing to let her go because they know if one teenager ran away [from Islam] and got away with it, other teenagers will try to do it," Soliman said.

Bary, whose family immigrated from Sri Lanka, is not a U.S. citizen and her family's immigration status is unclear. If returned to her parents, "she could be taken out of the country," Jivanjee said, "and that was her fear."

Attorney David Middlebrook, whose Texas-based firm, The Church Law Group, represents nonprofit organizations, said Bary's case isn't as cut-and-dried as it may seem to some. If Bary were 12 or 13 years old and had converted from one Christian denomination to another, Christians' perception of her case would likely be different, he said.

"The courts are going to look at this from a very neutral basis," he said. "These parents have rights and responsibilities. Are [the courts] violating these rights and responsibilities? Do you have reason to believe that the child is in danger? The belief has to be reasonable. How do you weigh these competing interests—the interests of the child, the interests of the family, the interest of someone who has

converted to the Christian faith?"

But Jivanjee sees the legal battle as bigger than Bary.

"What I think Christians have to keep in mind is that all this was brought on by a girl who refused to deny Jesus," he said. "It's a picture of a changing climate in our country. I would have thought people would have looked at the Islamic community with more suspicion and Rifqa with less suspicion. But that's the not the case."

The next hearing in Barys' case is scheduled for Sept. 29.