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Group Plans Kuwait Trip To Halt Planned Hangings

By Mary A. Johnson
Staff Writer

Arab and Jewish activists from Chicago are heading for Kuwait on Thursday to try to stop the planned hangings of 16 young Arabs accused of aiding Iraqi forces during the Persian Gulf War.

"We think we will be able to stop these executions because we are raising national hell," said Mary Abowd, 25, a Northwestern University journalism student and one of the activists. "We are hoping to put the Kuwaiti government in the international spotlight with its supposed move toward democratic operations."

The men, who range in age from 19 to 29, were sentenced to death on June 12 by the Kuwaiti government. They have been in custody since February, 1991. Human rights watchers say the 10 Palestinians and six Iraqis were tortured into confessions.

If the convictions are upheld by Kuwait's Court of Cassation this month and subsequently ratified by the emir of Kuwait, all of the men will be executed.

"These are all people who were arrested during the period of vigilante control after the war ended," said Ora Schub, an attorney with the National Lawyers Guild who will lead the team of four lawyers and Abowd, all from Chicago.

"Because the country was not in full operation following the war, the court system was not together."

International human rights organizations have determined there is evidence the prisoners were severely beaten to elicit confessions for alleged crimes of collaboration and subjected to repeated interrogation without legal counsel.

Sam Hannoun, a Chicago area business owner, has two nephews among the convicted men. Mu'ayad Yasser Hussien, 25, and Hussien Rashed Hussien, 23, were children when he came to this country from Kuwait in 1974.

Hannoun, who is not making the trip, said the two men were taken out of their apartments and imprisoned at the end of the Gulf War. Their parents, who now live in Jordan, were expelled.

Sam Hannoun

The parents begged to see their sons, and when they did, the young men had been abused and tortured, Hannoun said.

Although the delegation is scheduled to leave this week, they still must obtain visas. That task became more difficult when the Kuwait government two weeks ago closed down human rights organizations that could have sponsored the trip, said Leah Simon-Wiseberg of Chicago, a coordinator for the trip.

To obtain visas, the delegation would have to be sponsored.

If the visas come through, the delegation hopes to meet with members of the parliament, officials of the Justice and Interior ministries, defense attorneys and the emir. They also will attempt to see the prisoners and talk to family members.

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Area Arabs, Jews Desire Enduring Mideast Peace

By Mary A. Johnson
Staff Writer

Mary Abowd

Leah Simon-Wiseberg

Working together for peace

Mary Abowd, who is Lebanese American, and Leah Simon-Wiseberg, who is Jewish, by their example make a case that there can be an enduring peace in the Middle East.

They are part of an ad hoc committee seeking to stop the planned execution in Kuwait of 10 Palestinians and six Iraqis accused of collaborating with Iraqi forces during the Gulf War.

Abowd, 25, a Northwestern University journalism student, has worked on Israeli/Palestinian peace issues for years and lived in the West Bank for six months. "I see that the only future is a peaceful one that is resolved with justice for the Palestinians," she said.

Abowd will travel to Kuwait with the five-member delegation of Arab and Jewish Americans this week. She said the fact that Palestinians face execution in Kuwait drives home the plight of all Palestinians: "They have no homeland; they are not truly welcomed anywhere."

Simon-Wiseberg, who is a staff coordinator at the Arab Community Center on the Southwest Side, went to the occupied territories just before the Gulf War.

There, she participated in a conflict resolution program as part of her college studies. "It really pushed me as a Jewish American to address these issues. Because my grandparents survived the Holocaust, I grew up with a real sense of justice and the desire to fight for that," she said.

In Chicago, many Arabs and Jews have already faced what many in the Middle East must come to realize, both women said.

Abowd, a member of the Union of Palestinian Women, said the organization always has worked with the Jewish community.

"There is this misperception that Arabs and Jews can't work together," Abowd said. "We work together as people who are concerned about peace in the region and Palestinian rights."

Richard Roeper is on vacation