

U.S. accused of killing gay Iraqis

Refugee tells stunned audience that soldiers detained, executed gay civilians

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A fundraising event to benefit an LGBT community center in Lebanon last week took a surprise turn when stunned audience members were shown graphic photographs of beheaded corpses and images purportedly depicting U.S. soldiers preparing to execute gay Iraqis.

Two gay Iraqi refugees, who declined to use their real names, delivered a presentation at the Human Rights Campaign headquarters July 24 in which they detailed alleged abuses of fellow gay Iraqis while calling on their audience to donate funds to Helem, a Lebanon-based center that works to address the plight of LGBT people in the Middle East.

One of the Iraqis, who goes by the name "Hussam," showed the audience of about 80 people gruesome images, including shots allegedly of a beheaded man who was gay and another of the victim's twin brother grieving over the severed head.

While asserting that anti-gay violence in Iraq is often committed by Iraqis, Hussam also said U.S. service members were involved in anti-gay hostility. For example, he said service members displayed signs in front of their barracks with the words "Fuck Off Fags."

But the reaction from the audience turned from anger to shock when Hussam said U.S. service members had detained Iraqi civilians perceived to be gay and executed them.

He then showed an image of what appeared to be an American soldier standing in front of a small group of four or five kneeling naked men who were chained together. Hussam claimed the men were gay Iraqis and that he possessed images of their execution, which he did not show the audience.

Dana Beyer, a transgender activist and Chevy Chase, Md., resident who attended the event, said she was "appalled" by the images of the atrocities, but especially by the allegation that U.S. service members were murdering gay Iraqis.

"When it comes down to our armed services - who potentially have contributed to atrocities like that, I'm just appalled," she said. "And I hope that we will pursue this through the government, through the State Department and through the Department of Defense because this just can't be left standing."

Chris Farris, a gay D.C. resident who also attended the event, said he thought the photo was "disturbing and upsetting," but voiced skepticism about the veracity of Hussam's claim.

"It's very difficult for me to believe that my country would allow its military to engage in the conduct that has been apparently documented," Farris said. "I would urge the U.S. government to react."

When confronted by a *Blade* reporter after the presentation, Hussam said he feared public disclosure of the photos would incite further violence in Iraq and refused to turn over copies of the images.

If U.S. service members executed the Iraqis as alleged, it would constitute a violation of international law under the Geneva Convention or the Uniform Code of Military Justice, depending on the circumstances.

Defense officials couldn't immediately confirm whether allegations made at the presentation regarding U.S. service members were legitimate.

Air Force Lt. Col. Patrick Ryder, a Pentagon spokesperson, said he isn't aware of any cases that match the allegations made by Hussam and deferred to the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command for further comment.

Army CID spokesperson Jeffrey Castro also said he wasn't aware of cases of U.S. service members executing Iraqis perceived to be gay, but said he'd investigate the matter.

Christopher Nugent, a D.C. attorney who specializes in U.S. political asylum cases, including cases involving gay Iraqis applying for U.S. asylum, said he, too, was unaware of reports of anti-gay actions by U.S. military forces in Iraq.

Nugent said he is frequently in touch with non-profit organizations and legal groups that provide pro-bono legal services to Iraqi refugees, including gay refugees.

"The anti-gay persecution is greatest among Sunni and Shia militias," Nugent said, citing reports from non-profit groups operating in Iraq. No reports have come in indicating U.S. troops are responsible for anti-gay killings, he said.

Numerous sources have reported that Iraqis have allegedly committed human rights abuses against LGBT people in the country.

In April, the *New York Times* reported that a democratic Iraq coupled with an increase in security allowed an LGBT subculture to emerge, but the response to the new visibility has been "swift and deadly" and multiple victims of violence had been found, mostly men and boys suspected of being gay.

In a congressional fact-finding trip to Iraq at around the same time, gay Rep. Jared Polis (D-Colo.) started calling for greater U.S. action in addressing these issues after he learned Iraqi government officials were allegedly involved in human rights abuses against LGBT people.

Sponsors "shocked" by report

The July 24 event was co-sponsored by HRC, Human Rights Watch, and the National LGBT Bar Association, according to a posting on HRC's blog. HRC also listed the International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission as a co-sponsor, but Sarah Tobias, an IGLHRC spokesperson, said her organization wasn't involved.

Brad Luna, spokesperson for HRC, attended the event and said his organization was "shocked and disturbed" by the report of U.S. military involvement in the persecution of gays in Iraq.

"We've been working since then to verify and corroborate the claim, but have not thus far been able to do so," Luna said. "We take this sort of allegation very seriously and will continue to monitor the situation."

Scott Long, director of the LGBT Rights Program for Human Rights Watch, an international watchdog group, said he had just returned from a fact-finding trip to the Middle East on behalf of his

group's LGBT rights monitoring efforts.

"I have seen no indication in our research of any involvement of U.S. military personnel in targeted killings of gay Iraqis," he said. "I have seen no evidence of these allegations."

Long said he was in Lebanon two weeks ago and met with gay refugees from Iraq.

"I can certainly vouch for the work that is being done for Iraqi refugees in Lebanon," he said.

D'Arcy Kemnitz, executive director of the National LGBT Bar Association, attended the event and said she didn't know about Hussam's photos before he showed them. She also said that she didn't hear Hussam's allegation that the U.S. military was involved in atrocities and has no copies of the photos he showed.

Still, she vouched for Hussam's credibility.

"Based upon everything that I know, having worked with him in this kind of volunteer capacity, his credibility is beyond reproach," she said. "He's worked with international human rights groups since the time I've known him and before that."

She said she couldn't speak to whether the allegations warrant an investigation because, without having heard the remarks herself, she would be basing a decision on "hearsay upon hearsay upon hearsay."

Kemnitz emphasized that the "whole purpose" of the event last week was to "focus on providing some sort of support for the very few individuals who have been able to get out of Iraq."

"Individuals getting out of Iraq are incredibly vulnerable and they face extreme hardship as they're trying to get their refugee [status] processed, so that's why everybody came together in a volunteer capacity to help those guys out," she said.

She said she'd "just be absolutely heartbroken" if there were any negative consequences for the gay Iraqis seeking asylum.

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"There is no law and order"

Hussam discussed his personal experiences as a gay man living in Iraq with the *Blade* before the start of the Nellie's fundraiser Sunday.

"I was involved with the LGBT community in Iraq before and after the war," he said, in referring to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the regime of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

He said gays were far better off under Saddam's regime, even though, like all other groups, they had to obey the rules and restrictions of his dictatorial, one-party government.

"We had men's clubs and men's parties, which were gay events," he said. "The government gave us a blind eye. They knew we existed."

As a secular government that repressed Islamic forces opposed to his rule, Saddam cracked down on violence against various groups, including gays, Hussam said.

Saddam left most of the various religious and ethnic factions, including gays, alone in the country

“as long as you stayed out of his way politically,” Hussam said.

But after the U.S. invasion ended Saddam’s rule, the U.S. and allied forces failed to establish a workable replacement, leading to a breakdown of the governmental institutions needed to protect the safety of citizens.

He said the power vacuum was quickly filled by warring ethnic and religious factions, many of which began persecuting gays.

“There is no law and order,” he said, even under the current Iraqi government that is quickly taking over full control of the country from the U.S. military.

Asked which groups are most responsible for anti-gay persecution and killings, Hussam said, “You can’t easily point a finger. We have militias, religious groups, criminal groups, hate groups,” he said. Members of each of these groups have targeted gay Iraqis, according to Hussam.

“All minorities in Iraq are targeted,” he said. “But some have stood up and denounced it when the Kurds were killed, when the Christians were killed. No one stands up for the gays when they are killed.”

“I lost eight of my gay friends” to anti-gay killings, he said. There are now “hundreds of gays” whose identities are known to anti-gay forces and who are in serious danger, he said. “Every day that passes, someone is lost.”

He said gays in the U.S. can help by putting pressure on the U.S. government and on the United Nations to, in turn, put pressure on the government of Iraq to put a stop to the violence against gays and other minorities.

P.S.

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