

Jordan: American journalists who went missing in Lebanon say they were taken by force to Syria

Contributed by SHAFIKA MATTAR | Associated Press Writer
Friday, 10 October 2008

AMMAN, Jordan (AP) — Two American journalists who went missing during a vacation in Lebanon were quoted Friday as saying they were "kidnapped" by their taxi driver and taken into Syria, where they were held in custody for a week before being released.

The two — Taylor Luck, 23, and Holli Chmela, 27 — spoke to their newspaper Jordan Times upon returning to Jordan early Friday. They were released on Thursday in Damascus, where authorities said they had crossed the border illegally with the help of smugglers.

In the report, Luck said the two had hired a taxi driver to take them from Lebanon to Syria. But instead of driving to an official border crossing where they expected to get an entry visa for Syria, the driver went off the main road, then "locked the doors" and demanded their money.

Luck, of Oak Park, Illinois, said they refused to give the cab driver anything.

As they drove on, a military car showed up and pulled the taxi over, then moved the Americans and their luggage into their vehicle, Luck recounted. "We did not know we were in Syria until we saw a sign for Al Hosn Castle after 20 minutes of driving."

He said they remained in the Syrian jail for eight days. Syria's Foreign Minister said they were detained Thursday, a day after the U.S. Embassy put out an alert that they were missing.

"I found myself behind bars with more than 30 people, while Holli was locked up in another room. I refused to be separated from her and they finally put us in one room for one night before we were separated again," he said.

The Associated Press could not reach Luck or Chmela and calls to their cell phone numbers were unanswered Friday in Amman. U.S. Embassy officials could not immediately be reached for comment.

The Jordan Times chief editor Samir Barhoum dismissed Syrian claims the two had intentionally crossed the border illegally and said they were law-abiding citizens who "would never violate the laws." He added the journalists came to the newspaper's office immediately upon returning to Jordan.

Luck also told his paper the two did not reveal their profession to Syrian authorities but said they were tourists.

It was not clear why the pair expected to obtain a tourist visa at the Syrian border. U.S. citizens have to go through lengthy bureaucratic paperwork to get a visa, a process that can take weeks, because of tensions between the two countries. There are additional obstacles for journalists, who also have to acquire advance permission from the Syrian Information Ministry.

Luck said that their Syrian interrogators accused them of smuggling themselves into Syria to "cause problems." But he said the guards were kind, did not mistreat them and allowed them occasional meetings.

Later, one of the officers seemed to recognize Chmela from media, which had carried photos of the two after their disappearance was announced, and asked if they were the two American journalists reported missing, Luck recounted.

"He asked us: 'Are you Americans? Are you journalists? Are you the two journalists?'" Luck said. Their case was then reported to higher authorities, before they were finally handed over the U.S. embassy in Damascus on Thursday.

Luck said the pair "might have exercised poor judgment, but at the end of the day, we were victims."

Their disappearance was first reported by their families, prompting the U.S. Embassy in Beirut to raise the alarm and launch a search along with Lebanese authorities after the two failed to return as expected last weekend to Amman.

Smuggling is common across the Syrian-Lebanese border, particularly through back roads in remote parts of northern Lebanon. Recently, Syria deployed more troops on the border to crack down on smuggling and Islamic militants that Damascus says also infiltrate Syria from that area.

Luck has been a reporter at English-language Jordan Times for the past 18 months. Chmela worked as a clerk for The New York Times in Washington before leaving earlier this year to study Arabic in Jordan. She worked as an intern at the Jordan Times for three months before leaving the job several weeks ago.