

Americans convicted in Iraq



BAGHDAD, Iraq (AP) — A top Iraqi official called two Americans who strayed across the border "spies" Monday and suggested they were intent on sabotage. Still, he indicated there was some hope for leniency in their case.

Saadi Mehdi Saleh, Iraq's parliament speaker, talked to the Associated Press two days after the Americans were tried in an Iraqi court and sentenced to eight years in prison for illegally entering the country.

The men — David Daliberti, 41, of Jacksonville, Fla., and William Barloon, 39, from New Hampton, Iowa — are both employees of U.S. defense contractors in Kuwait. They crossed the Iraq-Kuwait frontier March 13.

Saleh was the first Iraqi official to comment on their convictions.

"Those two detainees were entering our border secretly and by illegal manner, maybe for political or technical reasons. And we have detained them to know these reasons," he said, according to his official translator.

Implying their motivation may have been sabotage, he said: "We have no aggressive intentions toward those two Americans. But we have just applied Iraqi law according to the manner we do to all the foreigners who are coming for sabotage or other political reasons."

A translation by the AP of Saleh's remarks included the following quote: "Sending spies or saboteurs, we reject this equation and don't agree with it. The

United States of America must understand this fact and then every problem will have its solution."

Conviction of the more serious charge of sabotage would have resulted in a minimum of 20 years in prison and possibly the death sentence for the two men.

Asked if there was room for leniency, Saleh said: "The humanitarian doors are not shut to them yet."

French officials intervened with Baghdad to seek the Americans' release, said Foreign Ministry spokesman Richard Duque on Monday in Paris. He did not indicate how Iraq responded.

Ryszard Krystosik, a Polish diplomat who handles U.S. interests in Baghdad, urged Iraq to free the Americans, saying they are "absolutely innocent" and insisting on the right to visit them in prison.

The United States broke diplomatic relations with Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

White House spokesman Mike McCurry said Saleh's suggestion the two Americans were intent on sabotage was "just not true."

"They know that. It was an innocent mistake. These two crossed across the border and had no intention to conduct any kind of sabotage at all," said McCurry on Monday.

Barloon's wife and brother also rejected Saleh's veiled accusation.

In an interview from Kuwait City, Linda Barloon told ABC's *Good Morning America* the insinuation was "totally ridiculous."

"I can't believe this is now turning into this type of situa-

tion and I can't even fathom it," Linda Barloon said.

Barloon's brother, Ed, told NBC's *Today* the two men's Iraqi defense lawyer told the court they didn't have maps, compasses or any electronic or navigational equipment in their vehicle when they were seized.

"These were just two individuals on their way to visit friends," said Barloon, speaking from Minneapolis.

Like other Iraqi officials, Saleh decried the U.N. sanctions imposed during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis that have crippled the nation's economy by banning oil exports and other trade.

He accused the United States of lobbying to maintain the embargo despite Iraq's contention it has complied with all U.N. requirements for the destruction of its nonconventional weapons.

But Saleh denied Iraq would attempt to link the Americans' plight with that of the sanctions. Washington rejects any linkage, and the U.S. State Department called Saturday's verdict a "misguided attempt" at diplomatic coercion.

The chief U.N. weapons inspector for Iraq, Rolf Ekeus, said Monday "serious concerns" remained over Baghdad's accounting of its biological warfare program. But Ekeus also said Iraq presented new data on its chemical weapons to replace erroneous information it supplied earlier.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Kathy Daliberti, the wife of one of the convicted Americans, David Daliberti, has set up an address on the Internet. It is: <http://www.swaninc.com/yellowribbon>.

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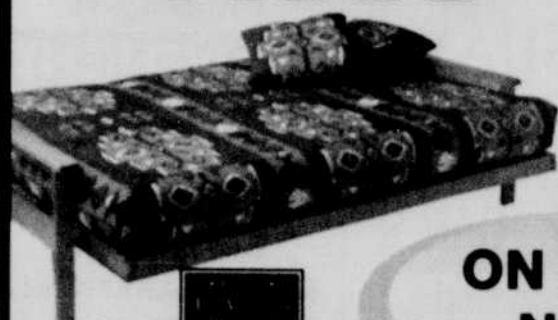
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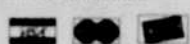
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