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Iraqi militants kidnap, behead American

The American, 26-year-old Nicholas Berg, was said to be in Iraq hoping to build a chain of cell phone towers

By Cam Simpson
and Stevenson Swanson
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

WEST CHESTER, Pa. — Islamic militants beheaded a 26-year-old American civilian and displayed a gruesome video of it Tuesday, saying he was killed in retaliation for the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers.

The body of Nicholas Berg, who grew up near Philadelphia, was found on a Baghdad highway Saturday, but the graphic details of his violent death did not become public until Tuesday when an al-Qaida-affiliated group showed the video on its Web site along with a vow that more killings will follow.

One of the executioners said in the video: "So we tell you that the dignity of the Muslim men and women in Abu Ghraib and others is not redeemed except by blood and souls. You will not receive anything from us but coffins after coffins ... slaughtered in this way."

News of the beheading shocked official Washington, including members of the Senate Armed Services Committee who were questioning officials about abuse of Iraqi prisoners

at Abu Ghraib prison.

The White House condemned the killing of Berg, who had visions of building cell phone towers across Iraq. Scott McClellan, President Bush's press secretary, said, "It shows the true nature of the enemies of freedom. They have no regard for the lives of innocent men, women and children."

The video of Berg's killing shows five men wearing headscarves and black ski masks standing over the American, who was bound and clad in an orange jumpsuit.

He says: "My name is Nick Berg. My father's name is Michael. My mother's name is Suzanne. I have a brother and sister, David and Sara. I live in ... Philadelphia."

After the militants read their statement, they pull Berg onto his side and put a large knife to his neck. A scream sounds as the men cut his head off, shouting "Allahu Akbar!" — "God is great." They then hold the head out before the camera.

Several television networks, including CNN and MSNBC, showed pictures of the frightened Berg but not the killing. ABC, CBS and NBC said they did not plan to show the beheading.

The Web site labeled the video "Abu Musab al-Zarqawi shown slaughtering an American," a reference to a Jordanian militant leader associated with al-Qaida. The U.S. military has blamed al-Zarqawi for suicide

bombings in Iraq and has offered a \$10 million reward for his arrest. It was not known whether al-Zarqawi was among those shown in the video.

Berg's family said they knew their son had been decapitated but didn't know the details until Tuesday. "I knew he was decapitated before. That manner is preferable to a long and torturous death. But I didn't want it to become public," Michael Berg said.

Berg's odyssey in Iraq was a strange one. His parents and U.S. officials portrayed him as a lone entrepreneur, a man who left home hoping to find success in the riches promised by Iraq's reconstruction.

Before extremists apparently kidnapped and killed him, authorities detained Berg in Iraq for as long as two weeks in late March and early April. But many details about his detention remained sketchy Tuesday.

Iraqi security forces arrested Berg in late March at a checkpoint near Mosul, according to U.S. officials in Washington familiar with the case. Berg's parents said they did not hear from their son between March 24 and roughly April 8, according to court papers they filed in Pennsylvania last month.

It was unclear Tuesday why Berg drew the attention of the Iraqis, although arrests at such checkpoints are common.

Whatever the cause of his arrest, Iraqi officials contacted FBI agents stationed in the country after learning Berg was an American, according to

officials in Washington. The FBI then questioned Berg in Mosul, officials in Washington said.

Kelly Shannon, a spokeswoman for the State Department's consular affairs division, said a U.S. consular official stationed in Iraq was in contact with Berg after his arrest. She said he was not involved in government reconstruction contracts.

After his arrest in Mosul, the FBI also briefly questioned Berg's family at their home in West Chester, so they could confirm his identity and his story, officials in Washington said.

Following the FBI interview, Berg's parents alleged on April 5 in a federal court petition that the U.S. military was illegally detaining their son. They said the Iraqis transferred him into U.S. military custody.

But a Pentagon spokesman said Tuesday the military's only involvement with Berg was limited to the brief court case, which his parents sought to withdraw just three days later, apparently because their son was released.

U.S. officials in Washington said they believe Berg returned to Baghdad immediately after his release, but they do not know when or how he may have been kidnapped. Before they initially lost contact with him on March 24, Berg had told his parents he planned to come home in just a few days.

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FAREWELL

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expanded, as has the number of international students. The University had peak international student enrollment just before 1997, when there were more than 1,600 students, she said. She said in recent years, overseas programs also have become very popular, with almost 800 students participating in exchange programs each year. The University also has been nationally recognized for its high involvement in international efforts like the Peace Corps, she said.

While the value of international education is recognized, international students face various challenges with the changing global climate, and there have been some emergencies. For instance, some students had difficulties during the Asian financial crises in 1997, she said.

Stark said changes in national economies affect the demographics of students who come here to study.

"I think there's a cycle in international education, which moves with the geopolitical scene," she said.

More stringent immigration laws after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks also have affected international education. Stark said implementing SEVIS, an electronic system which tracks international students, was a very complex process and may have fostered the perception that the U.S. is now less hospitable to students.

"Those of us in international education feel that's such a devastating result," she said.

Evidently, Stark has touched many students' lives; her office is full of pictures of international students who have passed through the institution. Stark's influence also manifests itself in the relationships she has built with students and colleagues.

"I can't think of anybody I'd rather work with," Associate Vice President for International Programs Tom Mills said. Mills said Stark was a thoughtful and capable adviser who could always be depended on to get a project done.

OIP Graduate Teaching Fellow Keavy Cook, who works with Stark on the ICSP program, also noted Stark's dedication and consistency. "She's one of the first people here and one of the last ones to leave,"

"I've learned that you can't make assumptions, that you need to listen ... Just about anyone who sits down with you has something to offer and you never know what it's going to be."

Ginny Stark
Director, International Student
and Scholar Services

Cook said.

International programs Associate Director Magid Shirzadegan, who will be taking over Stark's position, said he realizes he has significant shoes to fill.

"I'm sure I can't duplicate her leadership," he said, adding that Stark has always been a strong leader and dedicated advocate for international students.

"She has always spoken strongly on behalf of international students and scholars," he said.

American English Institute Director

Christa Hansen agrees.

"She very much keeps the needs of students at the forefront," Hansen said. She added that Stark has been a great resource for scholars in and outside the office, helping them to acclimate to their new environments.

Stark said her work has taught her many lessons.

"I've learned that you can't make assumptions, that you need to listen," she said. "Just about anyone who sits down with you has something to offer and you never know what it's going to be."

While many people say she will be hard to forget, Stark said she is not concerned about people remembering her. What is more important to her is that people who have interacted with OIP have found what they were looking for.

"I think it's mainly important that people have had a good experience at the University, and if this office has contributed to that good experience, then that's what makes me happy," she said.

Contact the news editor
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