

Cotes seek answers in Jonathon's death

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The kidnapers who held Jonathon M. Cote and four other security guards in Iraq for 17 months never asked for a ransom.

And they issued no public statements, never explaining whether they had a political motive for the abductions.

Finally, as their last act in a crime that seems baffling and senseless to many, they beat their prisoners to death.

Family members and friends of Cote, a 25-year-old former Amherst resident, hope a federal investigation will someday unlock the mysteries behind the deaths.



Lori Silveri, mother of Jonathon Cote, left, and her other son Christopher hope a federal investigation will someday unlock the mysteries behind Jonathon's death in Iraq.

"It's a strange, unusual and very sad case," said Douglas Brooks, president of the International Peace Operations Association, a Washington, D. C., group that represents private security contractors. "It is unusual that these guys were held for such a long time and then executed, with nothing said publicly by the kidnapers."

Claude Welch, a political science professor at the University at Buffalo who is an expert on Middle East terror groups, has another view.

"I think [the killings] were nothing more than a way to hurt America," Welch said. "I think the terrorists used Cote as a symbol, a way of striking out at a country that they see as an oppressor."

Some believe that Iraqis who worked at the private security firm set up the abductions, which occurred Nov. 16, 2006, while the guards were accompanying a convoy of military supply trucks for the Italian Army. The men were abducted at a fake Iraqi police checkpoint in southern Iraq.

“We’ve heard that the Iraqis who worked there were very bitter about the fact that Americans were paid more than they were,” said Francis L. Cote, Jonathon’s father.

Brooks said there have been unconfirmed reports that the kidnapping was an “inside job,” involving disgruntled Iraqis who had worked for Cote’s employer, Crescent Security Group.

“If that happened, the motive could have been money or seeking some kind of revenge against the company,” Brooks said.

But if the abductors kidnapped the guards for financial reasons, why were no ransom demands made?

That’s just one of the unanswered questions in the case. There are others:

- Who kidnapped the men, and why?
- If the men were abducted for political reasons, why didn’t the kidnappers declare their reasons?
- Where were the men held, and how did authorities find their bodies?

A videotape of the hostages was delivered to the Iraq media six weeks after the abductions. The videotape included a bearded and exhausted-looking Cote, asking the American people to pressure the U. S. government to leave Iraq “to help me and my friends get out of here.”

The video began with an image of the Quran and the words “The National Islamic Resistance in Iraq, the Furkan Brigades.” But since the release of the videotape, the kidnappers issued no public word about their political views or their reasons for the kidnappings.

Sen. Charles E. Schumer urged military agencies and the FBI to make every effort to hunt down the kidnappers and killers.

“The U. S. government has come to rely on heroic individuals like Jonathon Cote while fighting in Iraq,” Schumer said, “and the military and the FBI should do everything in their power to investigate the tragic murder of this brave Western New Yorker.”

So far, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies have released no information about the kidnappings, the killings, the recovery of the bodies or the progress of the investigation.

The last time anyone heard anything was last month, when the severed fingers of several hostages — including Cote — were sent to U. S. authorities in Iraq.

But no ransom demands were made, Francis Cote said authorities told him.

Those reports were disturbing but not surprising to James Phillips, an analyst on Middle East terror groups at the Heritage Foundation in Washington. Phillips said he has never heard of the Furkan Brigades or the National Islamic Resistance in Iraq, but he noted that Iraq has many small splinter groups that take part in kidnappings and terrorist attacks.

“Iraq is a very brutal place. Some of these groups are inspired by such a hateful ideology that they sometimes act more out of spite than any rational calculations,” Phillips said. “Some of these abductions of Westerners have no political inspiration. They’re just crimes.”

Both Brooks and Phillips observed that, in many Middle East abduction cases, hostages are traded or sold from one terrorist group to another.

“Sometimes, a hostage will be traded or sold two or three times,” Brooks said. “That may very well have happened in this case, although we don’t know if it happened.”

Crescent Security officials in Kuwait have not responded to e-mails from The Buffalo News seeking comment.

Francis Cote and Mark Munns, of Anderson, Calif., the father of slain hostage Joshua Munns, said they have many suspicions about the company.

For the last two weeks, Munns said, he has tried to reach officials at Crescent and has not had any success. He says he is trying to obtain information on death benefits to which the five workers were entitled.

“I figured I’d be the guinea pig. I sent all paperwork to [Crescent] and have not received any response. We’ve been lied to,” the father said.

Munns says he plans to ask the FBI to see if federal agents can get any information on Crescent.

Although Cote, an Army veteran, was no longer in the military at the time of his death, his family hopes federal agents will pursue the investigation as vigorously as they would if Cote and his co-workers were slain soldiers.

“When [Cote] went with Crescent Security, he was told that he was helping to rebuild Iraq from the devastation of war,” said Joseph Mombrea of Lewiston, a cousin.

The federal government has declined to specify what efforts were made to find and rescue the hostages, although law enforcement officials have told The News that extensive efforts were made in Iraq.

“It is an investigation that we’re continuing, with military agencies and police in Iraq,” said Richard J. Kolko, an FBI spokesman in Washington.

Mombrea is skeptical of the government’s handling of the investigation.

“I think the government distances itself from anyone who goes over there on his own,” Mombrea said. “The government waives all responsibility.”

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