

the independent florida alligator

News > Campus

Monday, March 17, 2008

Family, friends have renewed hope that former UF student alive in Iraq

Print Page

By JESSICA PONN, Alligator Staff
Writer

Monday, March 17, 2008 1:25 AM EDT

U.S. authorities in Baghdad have received the severed finger of a 25-year-old former UF student who is being held hostage in Iraq.

Jonathon Cote, who attended UF before moving to Iraq to work for a private security company, was kidnapped in November 2006 when his convoy was ambushed.



Former UF student Jonathon Cote, 25, leans against a Crescent Security vehicle in an undated photograph. Cote, working as a security contractor, was taken hostage in 2006 after his convoy was ambushed in Iraq.(Facebook.com)

Cote's friends and family said while they are obviously disturbed by the latest development, it has renewed hope that he is still alive.

"I personally feel very encouraged by the news, although it was very harsh to hear at first," said Maude Cote, his cousin. "It probably is a sign that whoever is holding him is willing to negotiate at this point."

After graduating high school in New York, Cote joined the military and spent four years in Afghanistan and Iraq.

When his tour of duty ended, he returned to the United States and decided he wanted to go to college at UF.

He began classes in the fall of 2005 and joined the Sigma Phi Epsilon Fraternity.

"He really took us all under his wing," said Matt Sloan, fraternity president. "Regardless of if you were a pledge or a brother or an alumni, you had a lot to learn from Jon."

Sloan said Jon was a vibrant, talented and confident friend who helped other students keep their personal problems in perspective.

But Cote had trouble acclimating to civilian life, he said.

"He felt that the life that he held over in Iraq was obviously very exhilarating and action-packed, and when he went to school at UF he had a tough time finding excitement in daily life," he said.

Cote decided to return to Iraq as a security escort, but about three months after he had arrived and one week before he was set to come home, he was kidnapped.

Little is known about who took him or what they want, though his captors released a video in December 2006 in which Cote told the camera he would not be released until prisoners in U.S. and British jails were released.

Maude Cote said in the video her cousin looked like he had lost a lot of weight. She said her family has not been given much information by the U.S. government but hopes Americans are on the ground looking for him.

In Gainesville, Sloan said Cote's friends are counting on his return.

"We are 100 percent holding out hope that Jon is alive and that he's coming back and he's going to spend another couple good years at UF," he said.

The Independent Florida Alligator

[X] CLOSE WINDOW