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Severed fingers delivered in Iraq raise hopes that hostage Jonathon Cote is still alive

Ex-Amherst man one of Iraq captives

By Dan Herbeck - News Staff Reporter
Updated: 03/13/08 8:46 AM

The severed fingers of five hostages — including former Amherst resident Jonathon Cote — were recently sent to American authorities in Iraq, Cote’s father said Wednesday.

Francis L. Cote said he was upset to hear the news about his son and doubly upset that he learned of it from the news media, rather than from government officials.

But the Amherst man saw one silver lining in the disturbing news.

“I think it means that my son is alive,” Cote told The Buffalo News in an interview late Wednesday. “It’s one way of knowing he’s alive, but not the way I would have chosen.”

The U.S. State Department and the FBI refused to confirm or deny a news report from Vienna, Austria, indicating that kidnappers sent the severed fingers of Jonathan Cote and four other abductees to American authorities in Iraq.

Cote, 24, is a U.S. Army veteran who was working in Iraq as a private security contractor when he and four co-workers were abducted Nov. 16, 2006. The men were guarding a convoy of Italian military trucks when they were surprised by a group of abductors posing as Iraqi police.

The story of their severed fingers being sent to American authorities was broken by Reuters News Service in Vienna. The story quoted Austria’s Foreign Ministry secretary-general, Johannes Kyrle, as saying DNA samples have proved that the severed fingers came from Cote and three fellow American hostages, and an Austrian hostage, Bert Nussbaumer.

Francis Cote said American government officials should have told him about the fingers rather than allowing him

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and other members of hostages' families to learn about the new developments from news reports.

"Why is it that the Austrian government contacted [Nussbaumer's] family and told them, but we still haven't been officially told about this by our government?" Cote asked late Wednesday.

The State Department has been giving weekly telephone briefings on the situation to family members of the four American hostages, Cote said. He said the latest was Monday morning.

"During our Monday briefing, we were told that there had been some activity in the case, but the State Department couldn't tell us if it was good news or bad," Cote said. "They would only say they had some DNA and fingerprint evidence that was confirmed as belonging to certain hostages."

U.S. authorities have been unable to determine whether the fingers were removed from corpses or while the men were alive, according to anonymous sources quoted by the Washington Post. The fingers were partially decomposed at the time they were obtained.

"There's no way to accurately depict at this point whether it was prior to or after; scientifically, I don't think they've been able to determine that," said a source familiar with the investigation.

The Post also said it was unclear how U.S. authorities in Iraq obtained the fingers. They were shipped to specialists at Quantico, Va., for fingerprint and DNA analysis, and Cote's was among the first to be identified.

Tight-lipped officials of the U.S. government had no comment on the situation when contacted by The News. A State Department spokesman, Edgar Vasquez, referred a reporter to the press office at FBI Headquarters in Washington. The headquarters office referred the reporter to Debra Weirman, a spokeswoman at the FBI's Washington field office. She declined to comment and asked The News not to publish a story on the case.

Authorities have never publicly identified the kidnappers, what organization or cause they might be linked with, or revealed whether any ransom demands have been made.

About five weeks after the abductions, kidnappers released a videotape showing the five hostages. The videotape showed Cote asking the American people to pressure their government to leave Iraq and "help me and my friends get out of here."

The Austrian news report is the latest in a series of developments that have made life painful for Cote family members for the past 16 months. Besides his father, Jonathon Cote has a brother, a stepmother and other relatives in Amherst. His mother, Amherst native Lori Silveri, lives in Florida.

Francis Cote said he was making his morning coffee when he heard the latest news at about 8:30 a.m. Wednesday. He said he received a telephone call from an official at the private security company that had employed his son in Iraq, telling him of the report..

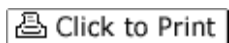
"At first, when I heard it, it was almost like somebody died," Cote said. "Then, as I thought about it, I thought that probably means that he is still alive. I think it also means that our government probably asked for proof that these guys are still alive, and that means that our government is trying to do something to get them back."

The elder Cote asked that supporters of his son monitor the family's Web site, freecote.com, for updates.

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