

U.K. protests Khomeini death order

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Britain protested to Iran on Thursday over Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's orders to kill Salman Rushdie, the author of "The Satanic Verses," and religious students in Iran threatened suicide attacks on him.

The bounty for killing the Indian-born writer was doubled to \$5.2 million, and Britain's airlines — including British Airways — tightened security following bomb threats against some flights.

The death threats against Rushdie, whose book has been denounced across the Moslem world as blasphemous, were called "appalling" by the U.S. State Department. A leading Islamic theologian who opposes the book said in Egypt that Khomeini erred by not giving Rushdie a chance to repent.

Rushdie, a naturalized Briton whose novel has sparked violent protests from Islamic fundamentalists, has canceled a promotional tour for the book in the United States and remains in hiding with his American wife, Marianne Wiggins. Published reports said they were under police guard in Britain.

Moslems say the allegorical novel offends their faith by satirizing the prophet Mohammed as fallible; implying that Islam is not the only true religion; portraying Mohammed's wives as prostitutes; and suggesting he wrote the Koran, rather than receiving it from God.

The British Foreign Office summoned Iran's lone diplomat in Britain, told him Khomeini's threat was "totally unacceptable," demanded special protection for its Tehran Embassy, and froze plans to expand diplomatic relations with the Islamic state.

"We recognize that Moslems and others may have strong views about the contents of Mr. Rushdie's book," British Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe said after his office summoned Iranian Charge d'Affaires Mohammed Basti.

"However, nobody has the right to incite people to violence on British soil or against British citizens," Ayatollah Khomeini's statement is "totally unacceptable."

Mekonnen

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destination, they were given employment. Mekonnen's job was to guard the cattle of about 15 area ranchers.

"I did that for about four months," he said. "It was a pain for me because I wasn't used to it. It was a different environment for me. I spent most of my life in the city with electricity and running water. In the country you have nothing."

Mekonnen's two friends had similar jobs in the area, but one of them who was pretending to be a farmer was exposed as a dissenter.

"He couldn't do things the way a farmer does," Mekonnen said. "People became suspicious of him. My job, on the other hand, was not something that could expose me."

The man was on a weekly visit to Mekonnen when government officials came for him at the home at which he was staying. The man Mekonnen's friend was staying with came warned him not to return home.

"I couldn't take him with me because every night I rotated among the homes of the 15 ranchers," Mekonnen said. "At about five o'clock, I told him that I would come back after I returned the cattle and spend the night in the forest with him. But when I came back, I couldn't find him."

Mekonnen and some others returned to the forest the next morning and found his friend. They arranged for him to travel to another safe place.

When spring came, Mekonnen and his remaining companion walked for more than a week to reach their next destination, staying with different people each night.

"Most of the time we were hungry," he said. "The people we stayed with were poor and had nothing to feed us."

Mekonnen and his friend stayed at the next place for about six months.

"It was a hopeless situation," he said. "The country was getting worse and more and more people were fleeing the cities. Some of them had even started an army of their own. By that time, I heard that most of my friends had been killed. The government's philosophy was that whoever opposed the government would die."

At the end of six months, Mekonnen along with four other men, decided to flee the country. They walked for two weeks to reach the nearest border, Sudan, which is on

Ethiopia's western border.

"Some of us were sick and tired and couldn't walk," Mekonnen said. "The area we walked through was largely uninhabited. Usually we would walk for about a day and find a village. In between we couldn't find water to drink."

The five men faced another problem upon reaching the Ethiopian-Sudanese border.

Armed guards were preventing people from crossing the border. They made their move at about 5 p.m. when most of the guards were asleep and managed to cross the border safely.

"But our problems didn't stop there," Mekonnen said.

Once across the border, the men were held in a Sudanese police department for questioning. They were not allowed to leave the building for five days while they explained their situation.

They explained that their only hope was to reach Khartoum, Sudan's capital city, where the United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was. However, the journey was three days by train and they had no money, so the police chief gave them train passes.

In the meantime, the men were hungry, but had no money for food.

"We communicated with some people in English, which is everyone's second language, and explained our situation," Mekonnen said. "They gave us some money for food, but it was embarrassing. We were actually begging, but we had no choice. We were dirty and our clothes were torn. We looked different and many people were afraid of us."

When they reached Khartoum, they received money from UNHCR.

"We bought new clothes and started feeling better," Mekonnen said. "But things were different than we expected. The people in Sudan are Muslim and their entire culture is different from the Ethiopian culture."

"In the Muslim society, they don't show affection for people of different religions. It is even forbidden for a man and a woman to walk down the street together and all the women must be dressed in a different way. Some even cover their faces."

At that time, 200,000 Ethiopian refugees were in Sudan with thousands more coming every day.

"They thought that we were spoiling their culture and the Sudan government started deporting refugees to cities other than Khartoum," he said. "I went to another city where I

worked at a small clinic for four years with a Swedish organization which helped refugees in western Sudan."

While in Sudan, Mekonnen met an Ethiopian woman named Haregewin who also had fled. They were married in 1980 and applied to enter the United States in 1982. After a year-long process, Mekonnen and his wife were allowed to immigrate to the United States. They arrived in Houston in 1983.

"It took courage to come here," he said. "It's not easy to adapt to a new culture. My hope revived after I got here. It's like a new life, a new beginning for me to start here."

A church organization that was sponsoring Mekonnen found him a job in a Houston animal hospital because of his medical experience in Sudan. After taking some English courses, he applied to Texas Southern University in Houston where he earned an undergraduate degree in biology. He continued working at the animal hospital while attending school.

"The first week in school I couldn't even comprehend what the teacher was saying," he said. "It was frustrating, but I managed to get caught up quickly."

After graduating from TSU, Mekonnen was accepted into A&M's veterinary school. His wife and seven-year-old daughter, Tigist, live in Houston where his wife works in a bank. He sees them only on some weekends.

"I have had to work hard," Mekonnen said of his American schooling. "I probably work twice as hard as other students because of the language and other barriers. It has cost me a lot. Most of the time I have neglected my family."

"In my country, we are tuned to one philosophy. The only way to make it in life is to go to school and work hard. That's the only way to be at the top in my country."

"Education is taken for granted in the United States. In my country, only a few people have the chance to be educated. So those few people work hard and take advantage of what education has to offer them."

After living in the United States for five years, Mekonnen was eligible to apply for citizenship. He was sworn in as a United States citizen in January 1988.

"My plans are to stay here," he said. "I can't go back to my country, and I don't want to go back. I'm fine here. And my little girl is definitely all American."

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