

Justice for Aafia US Tour Diary: Day 1 - Brooklyn, New York

Contributed by Yvonne Ridley
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Salaam alaikum,

What an emotional start to our tour with the Muslim Legal Fund of America.

Dr Aafia Siddiqui's brother Muhammad from Texas joined me on a platform with Cageprisoner's Saghir Hussein at Masjid At-Taqwa in Brooklyn, New York.

The room fell completely silent as Muhammad began talking about the day he arrived home to find a simple, brown cardboard box on his doorstep with his sister's name printed neatly on one side.

He talked about the significance of the box, what it could mean, how he feared its contents and how it took days to summon up the courage to open it.

As he talked about its contents - each book, handwritten note, and card held some significance - I could see the eyes of brothers present becoming glassy while others swallowed hard in a desperate bid to contain their emotion.

The masjid was fully to capacity on Friday evening with brothers and sisters who wanted to know what they could do for Aafia.

As Muhammad concluded his talk we discovered the box contained private papers and documents bundled carelessly together from the secure medical centre where Aafia had been assessed for her mental stability and capability to stand trial.

Following the assessment, and with no notice at all, Aafia was moved from the centre near her brother's home in Texas back to the New York detention facility and the box containing her private paraphernalia, was sent to Muhammad.

I also talked to those gathered at Imam Siraj Wahhaj's Masjid and I told them about the brutal strip searches she endures which are tantamount to rape. If Aafia struggles she is forcibly held down by male guards while female guards tear away at her clothes to carry out the cavity searches.

This procedure happens every time she meets with her legal team. It is brutal, physical, primitive and shocking that any woman - regardless of her faith, culture, nationality - has to go through this.

The fact that Aafia is a Muslim woman should bring shame on all of us that this is happening with our knowledge.

I am appealing to every single one of you to do what you can to raise this with your politicians, imams and other people of influence. The rape of Aafia Siddiqui has to stop, her torment must come to an end and what we want is justice.

While I know all of you will do your best for Aafia, I told the congregation at Masjid At-Taqwa that they are the most important group of helpers because of their close proximity to the New York Court. I asked them to turn out in force and show their support for Aafia every time the Judge convenes a hearing for Aafiya.

I wonder if Judge Richard Birman is beginning to feel the pressure because he appears to be indulging in a rather silly game of cat and mouse by constantly moving the court dates and times around making it very difficult to organise and sustain a large Muslim presence in the court for the hearings.

However, that will not deter the brothers and sisters who use the nearby masjid - they know the eyes of the Muslim world are focussed on the court case in New York and they know that we must maintain a presence of support for Aafia.

There was to be a hearing on October 28 but now it appears the judge has cancelled that date. When it is reconvened be sure that representatives of the new York muslim community will be present.

From Brooklyn I flew to Chicago to attend a gathering of one of the largest Pakistan communities in the Windy City. By strange coincidence retired General Pervez Musharraf was also in town on a speaking tour.

It was unnerving talking about Aafia at the Islamic Foundation in Villa Park when the man accused of delivering her into the hands of the Americans was just down the road addressing an entirely different sort of audience.

Tomorrow I am flying back to New York and heading for Coney Island at the Ziafat Restaurant ... a different location and a new audience but the message is the same. All of us must do whatever we can to make sure Aafia gets the justice she deserves.

Our message is simple: Bring Aafia Back Home, NOW!

For more information see the website of the Muslim Legal Fund of America:www.mlfausa.org