

**Opening Statement
Chairman Dan Burton
Subcommittee on Human Rights & Wellness
Government Reform Committee
“International Child Abduction:
The Absence of Rights of Abducted American Citizens in Saudi Arabia”
July 9, 2003**

While I was Chairman of the Full Committee on Government Reform, I initiated an investigation into the illegal kidnappings of American citizens to Saudi Arabia. There are several facts regarding Saudi Arabian law and culture that make these international child abduction cases noteworthy.

First, Saudi law gives Saudi men extraordinary power over their wives and children. A Saudi man literally owns his wife and children. As a result, the wife or child of a Saudi man may not leave Saudi Arabia without his prior written permission. There have been many cases in which adult female American citizens have been unable to leave Saudi Arabia because they have not been able to obtain the written permission of their male guardian, regardless of their Constitutionally guaranteed rights as American citizens.

Second, Saudi Arabia is not a signatory nation to the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction; the Hague Convention treaty puts into place general guidelines regarding how to handle international child abduction and international custody disputes. Accordingly, there are NO legal standards governing the return of kidnapped children from Saudi Arabia.

Our investigation from the last Congress led to numerous hearings, several legislative proposals, and even a Congressional Delegation to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in August of 2002.

Although it has been nearly a year since that visit, I will NEVER forget the tears on the faces of the American women who literally risked their lives to come and speak with me. Nor will I forget how terrified they were of the physical torture or even death that they might face if their Saudi husbands found out that they had gone to or been in touch with the U.S. Embassy. These women live in a constant state of fear, and it is time that the American government did something about it.

Because of the attention that the issue of international child abduction has received since we started this investigation, we have seen some marked improvements in the way that these situations are dealt with. Before, the custodial American parents were given NO hope that their sons and daughters would ever be returned to them. We are now starting to see some light at the end of the tunnel, although we have quite a ways to go before we completely emerge from the darkness.

Ms. Sarah Saga, who is here with us today, who until recently was held in Saudi Arabia against her will since she was 5 years old. Ms. Saga is now 24 years old. Just a month ago, she courageously risked her life and fled to the United States

Consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia with her two children, son Ibrahim age 5, and daughter Hanin age 3.

After a 10-day stay in the U.S. Consulate, Ms. Saga was able to secure safe passage for herself back to the United States to be with her mother, Debbie Dornier. Up until June 24th of this year, they had not seen each other for nearly twenty years. Unfortunately, the reunion was bittersweet for Ms. Saga, who in exchange for her freedom, had to leave behind her two children in the custody of their Saudi-national father.

Ms. Maura Harty, the Assistant Secretary of Consular Affairs for the Department of State, is also here with us today. Both she and Secretary of State Colin Powell have been working hard to bring back the American citizens who are being held against their will in Saudi Arabia. Ms. Harty is here to update this Committee on how the Department of State is handling these international child abduction cases.

Also in attendance is Mr. Stuart Verdery, the Assistant Secretary of Policy for the Department of Homeland Security, who is here today to observe our proceedings. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for taking time out of his busy schedule to observe our hearing today.

A representative of the Embassy of the Royal Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ms. Manal Radwan, is also here to talk with us about the Saudi policy on the abductions of American citizens to Saudi Arabia. Ms. Radwan will hopefully explain why the Saudi government has not been more helpful in assisting the U.S. in these cases, and what steps they plan to take to ensure the safe return of American citizens who wish to leave Saudi Arabia. We are also very interested to talk with her about the possibility of Saudi Arabia becoming a signatory nation to the Hague Convention, which is the crucial next step for the Saudi government to take in order to prove their commitment to resolving these cases.

The solution is clear: it is imperative for the United States Congress and our Department of State to work together to bring the necessary diplomatic and legal pressure to bear that will guarantee the safe return of these U.S. citizens who are being held against their will.

It is also time for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to join the 21st century and finally become a signatory nation of the Hague Convention. I believe that if we can take these two important next steps, we will be well on our way to resolving many of these heartbreaking international child abduction cases.