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Saudis Face Soaring Blood-Money Sums

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Tribes, Families Are Demanding Millions

By Faiza Saleh Ambah
Washington Post Foreign Service
Sunday, July 27, 2008; A14

MECCA, Saudi Arabia -- Badr al-Hasnani was 18 when he got into a fight with a soccer rival and fatally stabbed him. He confessed and was sentenced to death by beheading, as prescribed by sharia, or Islamic law.

For more than two years, Hasnani has been in a juvenile detention center awaiting execution while his family has tried to save him.

The parents of the victim, Majid al-Mahmoudi, have three options under sharia: to demand punishment, to spare Hasnani's life to receive blessings from God, or to grant clemency in exchange for diyah, or blood money.

The Mahmoudis agreed to accept diyah, setting the sum at \$2 million in cash, much more than Hasnani's family can afford.

Hasnani's case highlights the growing trend of exorbitant blood-money demands, which many say are fueled by greed and tribal rivalries. Last month, tribal leaders in the central city of Kharj demanded nearly \$11 million to pardon a man who had killed a member of their tribe.

Officials, clerics and writers have spoken out against the excessive requests, saying an ancient Islamic practice meant to financially support those who lose loved ones has been corrupted.

"Some families have become broke from these exaggerated sums being asked for diyah and live in poverty the rest of their lives," said Abdul-Aziz Qassim, an author and journalist who has written about blood money. "The families of some of the victims have turned it into a business."

To deal with the problem, the government recently set up the Reconciliation Committee, which works to lower the diyah requests and find wealthy donors to help the families of death row inmates unable to pay. Using a combination of religious preaching and mediation by influential tribal sheiks and prominent clerics, the committee says it has spared nearly 150 lives since its inception.

"Nothing is more precious to God than the sparing of a neck," said Nasser al-Zahrani, head of the Mecca office of the Reconciliation Committee. "We try to explain to these families with victims that it provides a blessing like no other."

Quoting the Koran, the Muslim holy book, Zahrani said he tells families: "He who takes a life, unless it be for murder or spreading terror in the land -- it would be as if he killed everyone. And he who saves one life, it is as if he has saved all of mankind."

Despite the committee's work, Saudi Arabia carried out 166 executions in 2007, compared with 39 a year earlier, according to the Rome-based human rights group Hands Off Cain, which campaigns against the death penalty.

In the kingdom, the death sentence is handed down in cases of murder, armed robbery, drug smuggling and

rape. The committee does not get involved in multiple murders, cases involving both kidnapping and murder, or rape.

When the court of last resort finds the crime to be especially grisly, the execution can be carried out even if the victim's heirs have accepted blood money, or the offender can be sentenced to additional years in jail and lashes.

Qassim, who heads the Islamic affairs section at Okaz newspaper, said the government should establish an official cap and initiate a nationwide campaign to educate people about the blessings of forgiveness and the sin of turning a victim's death into a money-making enterprise.

"Tribes like to say, 'We got this amount of money for a member of our tribe,' " he said. "People start to think the more money you can get for a member of your family, the more valuable your tribe is."

[King Abdullah](#), who has paid off several blood-money debts over the past few years, has been quoted as saying that the amount should not exceed \$130,000. The minimum set by the government is \$32,000.

Hasnani's father, Salem, a retired policeman who drives a taxi in the evenings, said he has sent more than a dozen emissaries to the victim's father, Attiyah al-Mahmoudi, a former policeman he knew from work.

After a year of insisting on going through with the execution, Mahmoudi was persuaded by a mutual acquaintance from his police force days with Salem to spare Hasnani's life for blood money.

"We're from the same neighborhood," said Salem Hasnani, 57, leaning on a floor cushion in his modest living room. "He knows my situation. He knows I can't afford that."

A mediator for the two families said the Mahmoudis did not want to discuss the case.

Salem Hasnani said he and his two brothers offered to give their homes to Mahmoudi, but he insisted on cash. They borrowed money, putting up their homes for collateral, sold several pieces of land and came up with \$400,000.

A few days before Hasnani's planned execution, initially set for the beginning of July, a committee member accompanied by a delegation of tribal sheiks and clerics persuaded Mahmoudi to decrease the sum to \$1.3 million.

Mahmoudi also agreed to a one-month postponement of the execution to give the family time to come up with the money.

Salem Hasnani printed up copies of the official paper provided by the committee that explains his son's case. With his brothers and his eldest son, Yasser, they have sought help from more than a dozen wealthy businessmen and businesswomen and a handful of princes in the capital of Riyadh and the coastal city of Jiddah. His young nephews have also posted appeals online asking for the money to be sent to a special account set up by the Reconciliation Committee.

In the past few weeks, they have raised \$200,000, Salem Hasnani said. And this week, after a second visit by the Reconciliation Committee, Mahmoudi agreed to reduce the diyah to \$1.2 million, leaving the Hasnanis \$600,000 short.

Hasnani's mother, Khairiya, said that she visits her son almost every week but that they never discuss his case. "He asks about his brothers, how they're doing in school," she said. "I always tell him to study and to pray."

Salem Hasnani's relatives said they do not know the details of the fight between their son and his victim. The two were in the city of Mina during the annual hajj pilgrimage, working over the school holiday, when they ran into each other.

"It started here," said Hasnani's brother Sayyir, 16, pointing to a large sandlot where they all used to play soccer. "They were on opposite teams, and they became enemies. And ever since then, anytime they met, they fought."

The Hasnani family held a "charity tent" Friday, a weekend day here. More than 100 men came, drinking tea and coffee while Salem Hasnani appealed for help.

"Some donated \$1,000, and some donated \$5,000," he said. "Together we raised half the money that's left. There are many do-gooders here. We have one week left, but I am praying for the best."

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