

Thai, Saudi officials meet over case of young teenager fleeing family

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Saudi officials say they have had nothing to do with the case of 18-year-old Rahaf Mohammed Alqunun and are not demanding her return, and that the controversy is strictly a family matter.

Rahaf Mohammed Alqunun, 18, said that her family was abusive and that she hoped to seek asylum in Australia.

Bangkok: Thailand's immigration police chief met Tuesday with officials of the Saudi Embassy in Bangkok, and said the officials told him they are satisfied with how the case of the young Saudi woman who claims to be fleeing her abusive family has been handled. Maj. Gen. Surachate Hakparn explained the Saudi reaction to reporters after a meeting with its diplomats.

Saudi officials say they have had nothing to do with the case of 18-year-old Rahaf Mohammed Alqunun and are not demanding her return, and that the controversy is strictly a family matter. Alqunun grabbed global attention when she sent out pleas for help via social media, saying she feared for her life if she were put on a plane back to Kuwait, where she had slipped away from her family, or her homeland.

Instead, she has been allowed to enter Thailand temporarily under the protection of the U.N. refugee agency, which was expected to take about five to seven days to study her case and her claim for asylum. She said she wants to go to Australia to seek refuge there. Surachate said Alqunun's father and brother were due to arrive soon in Bangkok, but that it was her decision whether to meet with them.

On Twitter, she has expressed fear of such a meeting. The father had previously been expected Monday night.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch has called on the Australian government to allow Alqunun's entry into that country.

Alqunun says she had a visa to continue her journey to Australia, but media reports say the Australian government has now canceled it.

Australian officials have not responded to multiple requests for comment. Human Rights Watch's Australian director, Elaine Pearson, said since Australia has expressed concern in the past about women's rights in Saudi Arabia, it should "come forward and offer protection for this young woman."

- AP