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Missing Couple In Afghanistan: Caitlin Coleman And Husband Josh Possibly Abducted

By DENIS D. GRAY and ERIC TUCKER

12/30/12

The family of an ailing, pregnant American woman missing in Afghanistan with her Canadian husband has broken months of silence over the mysterious case, making public appeals for the couple's safe return.

James Coleman, the father of 27-year-old Caitlan Coleman, told The Associated Press over the weekend that she was due to deliver in January and needed urgent medical attention for a liver ailment that required regular checkups. He said he and his wife, Lyn, last heard from their son-in-law Josh on Oct. 8 from an Internet cafe in what Josh described as an "unsafe" part of Afghanistan. The Colemans asked that Josh be identified by his first name only to protect his privacy.

The couple had embarked on a journey last July that took them to Russia, the central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and then finally to Afghanistan.

Neither the Taliban nor any other militant group has claimed it is holding the couple, leading some to believe they were kidnapped. But no ransom demand has been made.

An Afghan official said their trail has gone dead.

"Our goal is to get them back safely and healthy," the father told AP on Friday night by phone. "I don't know what kind of care they're getting or not getting," he added. "We're just an average family and we don't have connections with anybody and we don't have a lot of money."

He made a similar appeal in a video posted on YouTube on Dec. 13.

"We appeal to whoever is caring for her to show compassion and allow Caity, Josh and our unborn grandbaby to come home," he said.

Before the video came out, the family had kept quiet about the case since the couple disappeared in early October. They appear to have broken their silence in hopes it might lead to a breakthrough.

But many questions remain over the disappearances.

It is not known whether the couple is still alive or how or why they entered Afghanistan. And there is no information about what they were doing in the country before they went missing.

James Coleman, of York County, Pennsylvania, said he was not entirely sure what his daughter and her husband were doing in Afghanistan. But he surmised they may have been seeking to help Afghans by joining an aid group after touring the region. In the AP interview, he described his daughter as "naive" and "adventurous" with a humanitarian bent.

He said Josh did not disclose their exact location in his last email contact on Oct. 8, only saying they were not in a safe place. James Coleman also said the last withdrawals from the couple's account were made Oct. 8 and 9 in Kabul with no activity on the account and no further communication from them after that date.

"He just said they were heading into the mountains – wherever that was, I don't know," the father said, adding, "They're both kind of naive, always have been in my view. Why they actually went to Afghanistan, I'm not sure... I assume it was more of the same, getting to know the local people, if they could find an NGO (non-governmental organization) or someone they could work with in a little way."

There was some indication that the couple knew they were in dangerous territory, though they perhaps did not grasp just how dangerous. James Coleman said in general, they preferred small villages and communities because they felt safer there than in big cities, and that is where they wanted to focus their travels.

"I assume they were going to strike out on foot like they were doing," he added.

Both the U.S. State Department and Canadian Foreign Affairs Ministry say they are looking into the disappearance.

"Canada is pursuing all appropriate channels and officials are in close contact with local authorities," Canadian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokeswoman Chrystiane Roy said Friday, calling the incident a "possible kidnap."

It was not known whether the silence over the case by U.S. and Canadian officials and, until now, by the Coleman family was because of ongoing negotiations to seek their release. But information black-outs have kept some similar past cases quiet in an attempt to not further endanger those missing.

According to Hazrat Janan, the head of the provincial council in Afghanistan's Wardak province, the two were abducted in Wardak in an area about 25 miles (40 kilometers) west of the capital Kabul. They were passing through Wardak while traveling from Ghazni province south of Kabul to the capital.

Wardak province, despite its proximity to Kabul, is a rugged, mountainous haven for the Taliban and travel along its roads is dangerous. Foreigners who do not travel with military escorts take a substantial risk.

He said they were believed to have been taken from one district in Wardak to a second and then into Ghazni.

"After that, the trail went dead," Janan said.

He said it was suspected that the kidnapers were Taliban because criminal gangs would have likely asked for a ransom.

When the AP contacted Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid about the missing couple two months ago, he said the group had carried out an investigation and found no Taliban members were involved.

"We do not know about these two foreigners," he said in a telephone interview.

Janan's information could not be independently verified, and U.S. and Canadian officials still do not say for certain the couple was abducted.

NATO officials said they had no current information on the case, which was turned over to the U.S. State Department after it was determined the couple were not affiliated with foreign military forces.

Coleman said his daughter and her husband met on the Internet and married in 2011. They had previously travelled through Central America so they had some experience abroad.

During their recent Asian travels, they bought local goods to help vendors, slept in their tent and hostels and interacted with villagers. Despite her travel fever, love of history and a desire to do good, her father said Caitlan "wanted basically to be a housewife and have a bunch of kids."