

The Sydney Morning Herald

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This was published 6 years ago

From the archives, 1992: Missing children resurface in Malaysia

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July 24, 2019 – 4.00pm

First published in *The Age*, July 27, 1992.



Iddin and Shahira.

Foreign Minister complains

The Federal Government last night expressed its disappointment to the Malaysian Government after the father of the Gillespie children, the Malaysian prince Raja Bahrin Shah, came out of hiding in Kuala Lumpur yesterday to tell why he had taken the children from Melbourne.

The Government expressed its “concern and regret” that the children Iddin, 9, and Shahirah, 7, had been taken from Australia.

At a news conference in Kuala Lumpur, Raja Bahrin Shah indicated that he would not be returning the children to their mother, Mrs Jacqueline Gillespie. He said he had taken the children because of "Allah's will".

"It was not my decision but almighty Allah's. When Allah wants something to happen, it happens. Allah in this case wants my children to grown up as Muslims," Raja Bahrin Shah said.

The latest development is likely to put fresh pressure on the delicate relations between Australia and Malaysia. The Foreign Minister, Senator Evans, expressed disappointment about the incident in Manila last night at a meeting with his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Abdullah Badawi, after the prince's news conference in Kuala Lumpur.

Senator Evans also stressed the need for Australia to be allowed consular access to the children.

The children's stepfather, Mr Iain Gillespie, said in Melbourne last night that he and his wife would never stop fighting to get Iddin and Shah back.



Jacqueline and Iain Gillespie. NEIL NEWITT

"It's a whole new ball game now. I implore the Australian Government to take immediate action to ensure the welfare of our children, and to take immediate steps to enable my wife and hopefully myself to have access to them," Mr Gillespie said.

"Without that access their emotional wellbeing is impossible." Mr Gillespie said he and his legal advisers would meet representatives of the federal Attorney-General, Mr Duffy, in Canberra this morning, and possibly Foreign Affairs officials.

Senator Evans said Australia would press Malaysia and Indonesia to sign an international convention that enforces custody and access rights in child abduction cases. He said he intended to raise the Hague Convention on Child Abduction with his counterparts from the

two predominantly Islamic countries.

The prince and the children, who have been the subject of an intense federal search initiated in Australia after their disappearance on 9 July, returned to Malaysia “a few days ago”, Raja Bahrin Shah said.

He refused to reveal how he had eluded the Australian authorities.

When asked how he had travelled back to Malaysia without his passport, which he left at a Melbourne hotel, he said it was “Allah’s will”.

The prince appeared at the news conference without the children. But Malaysian journalists who saw the prince with the children at his Kuala Lumpur palace earlier yesterday are reported to have said the children appeared happy.

Raja Bahrin Shah denied that he had been in Indonesia, as suggested by Senator Evans on Saturday.

The prince, who said he was shocked to learn that the children had been christened 18 months ago, produced birth certificates to prove the children were Malaysian and a Malaysian Islamic court certificate awarding him custody.



Jacqueline and Iain Gillespie face a ring of television cameras. MARIO BORG

“They were born Muslims but I was surprised that they were baptised one-and-a-half years ago. I fail as a father and a Muslim if I don’t do something,” he said.

“I am perfectly amazed myself to see they are adapting very well to life in Malaysia, and I have no intention of returning them to Melbourne.”

He said he would allow Mrs Gillespie to see the children if she could assure him that she would not influence the children against the Islamic faith.

“Their future should take precedence over mine. If she could promise me that she would not

influence the children I don't see any reason why she should not meet them."

The acting Foreign Minister, Mr Kerin, said in Canberra last night that the Australian high commission in Kuala Lumpur had already initiated moves to seek consular access to establish the well being of the children.

He said the Justice Minister, Senator Tate, had assured him that assistance would be available to the Gillespies under the Overseas Custody (Child Removal) Scheme, which allows for Government financial help in taking legal action in such matters in foreign countries.

The Malaysian Law Minister, Syed Hamid Albar, said last week Raja Bahrin had the right of custody of the children under Islamic laws because the mother automatically lost custody of her children if she changed her religion.

Father thanks Allah for children's return

"In our journey, we stopped at kampongs, happy to go fishing and walk barefoot. I feel their instincts are still here."

So spoke Raja Kamarul Bahrin Shah, prince of the Malaysian state of Trengganu, about his children, Iddin, and Shahirah, when he surfaced publicly in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.



Raja Bahrin Shah with his son Iddin [L] and daughter Shahira in 1996. MAZLAN ENJAH

Asked about the culture shock that Iddin, 9, and Shahirah, 7, faced, the prince said the children were happy to be back in Malaysia. "I think you have to believe in genetics. I was surprised they were so much at home. Their mother was half Asian and I am full Asian, so they are three-quarters Asian."

The prince, wearing the traditional Malaysian black cap or songkok, an over-sized brown suede coat and jeans looked tired and emotionally drained when he appeared 30 minutes late for his news conference at Kuala Lumpur's Park Royal Hotel.

Malaysian sources say the first sighting of the prince since his disappearance with the children was at his palace in Kuala Lumpur, Istana Trengganu, at 4.30 am yesterday.

Before the news conference, he allowed a journalist and photographer from the 'New Straits Times' newspaper to see him with the children. But at the news conference he avoided questions about the whereabouts of the children, except to say that they had been in Malaysia for a few days and Kuala Lumpur for a day.

He said he had taken the children to ensure their upbringing in the faith of Allah. According to the prince, it was Allah who had made his secret mission possible.

All questions about his and the children's movements since their disappearance were turned away with references to his God. Asked how he got away with the children, he said: "Enough to say that with the blessing of Allah ..." Had he left Australia by boat? "Allah can do things in so many ways."

The prince said it was the christening of the children that had motivated him to act. If their Islamic upbringing could have been guaranteed (with their mother) he would not have minded, he said.

"They had been baptised one-and-a-half years ago ... so shocking ... I was not informed."



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