

## Harvard peers press to stall a deportation

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### In letters, dozens defend arrested divinity student

By Maria Sacchetti, Globe Staff | April 30, 2009

CAMBRIDGE - Nur Munir was supposed to earn a master's degree from Harvard in June. But this month he vanished.

Classmates said the slight, gentle divinity student had never missed a session in his seminar on Islamic law, where he sat right next to the professor. He was a fixture at prayers at the Harvard Islamic Society. Students began to ask: "What happened to Nur?"

Soon, one of his professors received an e-mail: Munir was in a Pennsylvania jail fighting deportation to Indonesia.

Now, his classmates and professors are waging a letter-writing campaign to persuade federal immigration officials to grant Munir a stay of deportation, at least until he completes his master's in theological studies. Munir, who classmates say is a Muslim who passionately supports peaceful relations with Jews, has been fighting to stay in the United States for the past decade.

A federal appeals court in Pennsylvania rejected his political asylum case in March, and he was taken into custody on April 6 after he checked in with authorities.

"It was just a shock," said Anne Siders, a law student who sat next to Munir in the seminar on Islamic law. "It's bizarre to have someone just disappear from class. I just think it's ridiculous. He's been here this long and two months before the semester is over, suddenly this is the moment he has to go?"

As of yesterday, more than 35 students and several professors at Harvard and a Jewish college he previously attended in Pennsylvania had written letters of support. Many praised his fluent Arabic, Hebrew, and English and his deep knowledge of Islam and Judaism.

"That is a very rare combination - and a precious one as well," professor Bernard Septimus, a Harvard professor of Jewish history, wrote in a letter provided by Munir's lawyer. "I am a skeptical man with a sensitive nose for phonies: I can say with confidence that Nur is the genuine article, someone who wants to devote his life to bringing Muslims, Jews, and Christians together through an appreciation of their commonalities and a respect for their differences."

Baber Johansen, Munir's Islamic law professor, who received the e-mail from Munir's lawyer alerting him to the arrest, wrote that he was "shocked and distressed" by the case and feared that Munir's treatment would create anxiety among other Muslim students as well.

Students called Munir a spirited debater and the kind of man who would stay after class to explain a complex issue to classmates or clean up after a dinner at the Harvard Islamic Society.

"He is not one of those people who just sits back and listens in class," said Kate Van Akin, a law student in Johansen's class who has been organizing much of the letter writing.

Munir's lawyer, Dennis Mulligan, executive director of the Nationalities Service Center in Philadelphia, has asked US Immigration and Customs Enforcement to defer Munir's deportation, saying the 41-year-old father could make a positive contribution to the United States.

Also, he said, Munir has family concerns: His wife suffers from health issues from when she was hit by a car in 2006 while crossing the street after she dropped off her daughter at school. The couple has a 12-year-old boy and a 7-year-old girl, who was born in America. They live in Pennsylvania, where Munir traveled on weekends when his Harvard classes were over.

Michael Gilhooly, a spokesman for the immigration enforcement agency, confirmed that Munir is in custody in York County Facility in Pennsylvania but said he could not comment on his case because of the agency's privacy policy.

Munir is facing deportation because of civil immigration violations, according to his lawyer and federal officials. He does not have a criminal record, his lawyer said.

His troubles began in May 1998, court documents show, when Munir was working at the Indonesian Embassy in Cairo and leaked a tape recording of a talk by then-President Suharto to a student newspaper in Indonesia. In the talk, Suharto reportedly expressed a willingness to step down. Violent protests and Suharto's resignation soon followed.

Fearing repercussions from Suharto supporters, Munir fled to Pennsylvania the next month on a student visa, according to the documents and Mulligan, his lawyer.

He left home for several weeks, hitched a ride that inadvertently took him across the border into Canada, and was stopped by US immigration officials when he tried to return because he wasn't a student at the time.

"He definitely wants to stay," Mulligan said. "He wants to continue his studies. He wanted to put his knowledge to use in these very troubled times."

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