

Saudi sisters found dead in New York spoke of harming themselves, police say

By ASSOCIATED PRESS
NOV. 3, 2018

Reporting from NEW YORK —

Two immigrant sisters from Saudi Arabia whose bodies washed up on the New York City waterfront, bound together with duct tape, had told people that they would rather harm themselves than go back to their home country, according to investigators.

The bodies of Tala Farea, 16, and Rotana Farea, 23, were discovered Oct. 24 near the Hudson River, two months after they were last seen in Fairfax, Va., where they had been living in a shelter amid allegations that they were abused at home.

Police said the sisters had been in Manhattan since Sept. 1, staying at expensive hotels and ordering in their meals until a credit card they were using maxed out. A jogger said he saw them praying at a playground near the river, sitting about 30 feet apart with their heads in their hands, hours before their bodies were found, police said.

New York Police Chief of Detectives Dermot Shea said people who knew the Farea sisters in Virginia told investigators that they made statements within the last year indicating “that they would rather inflict harm on themselves — commit suicide — than return to Saudi Arabia.”

Shea stopped short Friday of saying that the sisters had killed themselves but said police have “no credible information that any crime took place.” The medical examiner has yet to rule on their death and the case remains under investigation, he said.

The sisters’ bodies were taped together, facing each other and fully clothed, police said. There were no obvious signs of trauma and it appeared that they were alive when they went into the water, police said.

The mysterious deaths of the Farea sisters have drawn worldwide attention and fueled rampant speculation and online conspiracy theories in the wake of the Oct. 2 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.

The sisters' mother told detectives that the day before their bodies were discovered, she received a call from an official at the Saudi Embassy ordering the family to leave the U.S. because her daughters had applied for asylum.

The embassy has denied talking to the family about any asylum request.

The Associated Press has not been able to make contact with the parents of the sisters.

The Farea sisters moved to the U.S. from Saudi Arabia with their mother in 2015, settling in Fairfax, a suburb of Washington, police said.

They left their family home and were placed in a shelter-like facility after an earlier disappearance, in December 2017. At the time, Shea said, "it was raised that they were the subject of abuse."

Rotana was enrolled at George Mason University in Fairfax, but left in the spring.

The sisters were last seen in Virginia on Aug. 24. They were reported missing Sept. 12.

Police, citing credit card records, an Uber receipt and other evidence, said they arrived in New York City on Sept. 1 after making stops in Washington and Philadelphia.

They appeared in good health on security video police located from about a week before their bodies were found, Shea said.

Police initially struggled to identify the bodies as much of the city and the country was transfixed by other news, such as the series of package bombs sent to prominent Democrats and other critics of President Trump.

Police released sketches of the sisters' faces and posted repeated calls for the public's help in identifying them on social media. Once they were identified, police sent detectives to Virginia to piece together the last months of their lives.

The jogger who said he saw the sisters praying went to the police on Wednesday. He tol