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School warns man who rebuked Saudis

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An Ethiopian who rebuked four Saudi students who, he said, delighted in the carnage of Sept. 11 has been admonished by his university.

"Future incidents ... will result in you facing serious disciplinary sanctions," the school warned.

On Sept. 22, Zewdalem Kebede, a senior majoring in political science at San Diego State University, was studying in the Reserve Book Room in Love Library, according to an Oct. 17 report in the Daily Aztec, the student newspaper. Nearby, three Saudi Arabian students sat talking in Arabic, a language Kebede speaks fluently. When the conversation turned to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Kebede was shocked to find that they were pleased with the results.

"They were happy," the *Aztec* quoted him as saying.

The Ethiopian asked, in Arabic, how they could feel happy about thousands of people being buried alive under a mountain of rubble. He said they should be ashamed, not proud, of the actions of their countryman Osama bin Laden.

Kebede told the *Aztec* that he spoke in Arabic so as not to disturb others studying in the library and to keep the conversation private. "I didn't want to spread it," he said. "I didn't want the other students to hear."

A fourth Saudi approached from a nearby table and asked Kebede in English if he had a problem with the other students speaking in Arabic.

At this point "a heated exchange" took place. Kebede told the man there was no problem, and the man asked if Kebede was going to threaten them, to which he replied that he would not and returned to his table.

About 30 minutes later, two university police officers approached the Ethiopian and asked to speak with him. "Kebede related his story of what had occurred," the student newspaper said. "The officers informed Kebede that he should have reported the incident to him rather than get involved."

Subsequently, Kebede received a letter dated Sept. 25 from the university's Center for Human Rights and Responsibilities, a copy of which was obtained by United Press International. In it attorney Antionette Y. Jones, university judicial officer, ordered in bold, underlined text: "You must meet with me within three days of the date of this letter for an informal conference."

Kebede met with Jones on Oct. 3. In a letter to Kebede dated Oct. 5, also obtained by UPI, Jones wrote:

"No disciplinary action will be taken by this office at this time, but you are admonished to conduct yourself as a responsible member of the campus community in the future. Specifically, confronting members of the campus community in a manner that is found to be aggressive or abusive is serious. Consider this letter to be your only warning that future incidents, where your involvement is proven, will result in you facing serious disciplinary sanctions."

A call to Vice President for Student Affairs James Kitchen was referred to Jack Beresford, the university's director of marketing and communications, who was asked why the admonition had been necessary.

"The Saudi students called the police (and) basically claimed that they felt threatened by his actions," Beresford said. "Mr. Kebede doesn't deny that he raised his voice and was communicating in an agitated manner."

Did the university take seriously the four Saudi's claim of feeling threatened by Kebede?

"They called the police. I have no way to know how they felt," Beresford said.

"We still have to have a civil campus where people can feel free to speak whatever their mind is in a private conversation and not feel threatened by other students."

A group opposed to the university's response also sees the issue as one of free speech. FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, was founded by University of Pennsylvania historian Alan Charles Kors and Boston civil rights attorney Harvey Silverglate. Its mission statement is "to defend and sustain individual rights at America's increasingly repressive and partisan colleges and universities."

The Philadelphia-based organization has written to San Diego State President Stephen Weber expressing its "grave concern regarding the official retaliation against ... Kebede." In an Oct. 22 letter, FIRE's director of legal and public advocacy, Greg Lukianoff, made four requests.

FIRE asked that the university affirm that Kebede's opinions are fully protected under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, that it guarantee that Kebede will receive "no further retaliation for the expression of his constitutionally protected opinions," that the school expunge all

derogatory information related to the incident from Kebede's records and "pledge that the California Code of Regulations will never again be interpreted as interfering in any way with students' constitutional rights, either by sanction or threat of sanction."

Beresford told UPI on Thursday night that he had not seen FIRE's letter and could not comment on it.