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Despite threats, Del. man's family seeks justice from Libya

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Relatives of a Rockland man killed during a 1985 terrorist attack in Rome say they will not be bullied by Libya.

That is how the Buonocore family views recent threats by the North African nation to cut oil production because of suits seeking compensation for losses due to terrorism.

"We will fight on," said 72-year-old Cecile Buonocore, whose son John Buonocore III was killed at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Fiumicino Airport in an attack orchestrated by Libya and Syria.

"There's a lot of families involved and we're all going to help in any way we can to hold Muammar Qaddafi responsible for this," she said.

The Buonocores are among 29 plaintiffs who earlier this year filed a class-action lawsuit against Libya in Washington, D.C., under a law passed in January.

At least one other suit has been filed in that court using the law -- the Justice for Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Act -- that pursues assets of nations that export terrorism.

In one of the suits -- filed over the November 1985 hijacking of Egypt Air Flight 648 that resulted in the deaths of 60 people -- the plaintiffs are seeking damages of \$1 billion per victim. The suit involving the Buonocores seeks more than \$1.85 billion for each victim.

The damages, the suit says, are intended to punish Libya and others "for their conduct in supporting terrorism" and to send a message that the United States and its people will respond "to the lawless acts of terror and murder with the application of orderly justice."

Cecile Buonocore and her husband, John Jr., are pursuing the suit, despite Libya's threats, for their son.

"We know that John wants us to recover and we have," Cecile Buonocore said. "We're doing the best we can in his name and I know he would want us to do this. That much I know. He'd expect it."

John Buonocore was waiting at the Rome airport on Dec. 27, 1985, to return home for his father's 50th birthday after spending Christmas with relatives. The 20-year-old Dickinson College junior was at the check-in counter of Trans World Airlines when suicide attackers began hurling grenades and firing at travelers. A similar attack took place in Vienna's Schwechat Airport.

Nineteen people died in the two attacks.

Cecile Buonocore, who learned of her son's death by watching graphic news accounts of the attack, responded by becoming active in the Compassionate Friends' Brandywine chapter, which started in 1986 to help families grieving over the loss of a child.

Libya, which has admitted its terrorist activities, holds Africa's largest oil reserves.

Its threat to cut production concerns families such as the Buonocores, who worry that Americans, already hurting from the economic downturn and ever-increasing fuel prices, will turn a blind eye to their cause.

"I wouldn't think the tide has turned against us by individual Americans," said Todd Buonocore, John III's 39-year-old brother. "But I would expect the lobbyists to try and get their political spin. ... We saw their most recent example with that comment last week."

Todd Buonocore, a financial adviser, referred to threats last month made by Shokri Ghanem, chairman of Libya's National Oil Corp., to cut production from its current 1.7 million barrels a day in response to the suits.

"We hope that we reach a solution that at least respects the sovereignty of the different countries," and excludes

"this threat of force," Ghanem said in a telephone interview with Bloomberg television.

Ghanem was prime minister from 2003 to 2006, when the U.S. began easing two decades of sanctions and removed Libya from a list of nations that sponsor terrorism. Following Ghanem's comments, oil futures rose as much as \$4.40 a barrel.

He is "trying to use his leverage of cutting off ... what they produce to try to stick it a little bit more to the American consumer and get public opinion more on their side," Todd Buonocore said.

Fanning his family's concerns are reports that the Bush administration has asked Congress to exempt Libya from the law. While this has not discouraged the Buonocores from pursuing their suit, they said they are irked that an administration that pushes its fight against terrorism would be willing to buckle in exchange for oil.

"We viewed it as hypocritical," Todd Buonocore said about President Bush. "That he wants to, in a way, reward terrorism."

Nicole Thompson, a U.S. State Department spokeswoman, said the U.S. position is to see "a just conclusion negotiated in this situation. We want to see some closure for these families in this matter."

Thompson could not say if the Bush administration has stopped pushing for Libya's waiver.

Gordon Johndroe, Bush's national security spokesman, has said that seizing assets could discourage nations like Libya that have renounced terrorism from helping the United States fight it. There is a potential for U.S. companies to invest billions of dollars in Libya's oil sector, as well as other areas, meaning Libyan assets increasingly could come under American control, he said.

The Buonocores received assurances from U.S. Sen. Joe Biden, D-Delaware, in May that he would "not support such a waiver absent a resolution of cases like yours."

"We are very fortunate because Sen. Biden and his staff have been so, so helpful to us," Cecile Buonocore said.

Despite that, American oil firms have been hiring lobbyists to push for Libya's waiver.

Oil company representatives say victims of terrorism are entitled to compensation but object to the law, saying it threatens to disrupt commerce that the United States is trying to encourage.

"The world is energy-interdependent, and stronger commercial relationships between the U.S. and Libya would help the U.S. achieve greater energy security," Margaret Cooper, a Chevron spokeswoman, said in a statement.

The Buonocores' attorney, Ron Jenkins, countered that Libya could return to the "community of nations" only after it has accepted full responsibility for its crimes.

Jenkins said it is frustrating to see elements of the U.S. government promote the interests of oil-rich sponsors of terrorism over the rights of Americans.

"The blood of innocent Americans murdered by Libyan terrorists cannot be valued in barrels of Libyan oil," Jenkins said. "Their blood, and the principles at stake here, are priceless, and far more valuable than Libyan oil ever will be."

He said victims of terrorism have worked hard to change anti-terrorism laws, adding that the Justice for Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Act should stand as a lasting monument to their persistence and courage.

"We will not rest until Libya is held accountable for its terrorist crime in this case," he said.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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