

Bahraini Sheika Can Stay in U.S., Royal Family Says

By KEN ELLINGWOOD
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SAN DIEGO—The international drama involving a daughter of Bahraini royalty who used phony documents to elope with a U.S. Marine took a twist Monday when the family said it would agree to let the young woman stay in the United States.

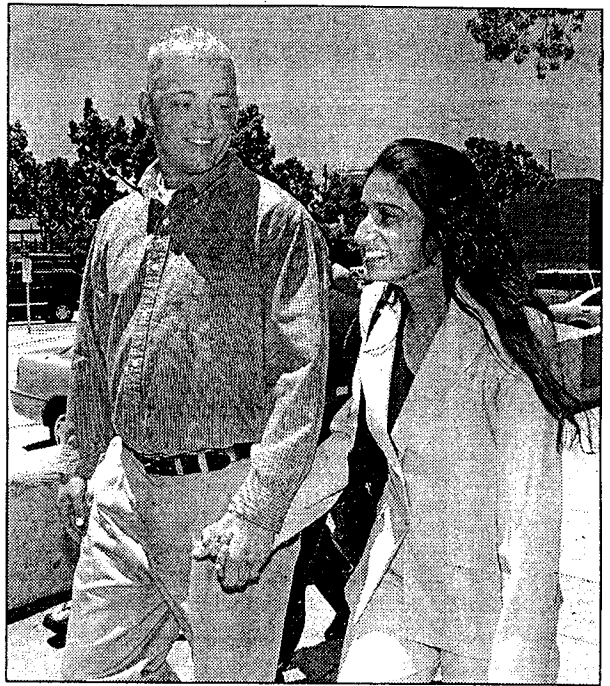
A spokesman for the royal family in Bahrain said the family is even willing to help 19-year-old Meriam Al-Khalifa remain in this country. Al-Khalifa lives at Camp Pendleton with her husband, Marine Pfc. Jason Johnson, 25.

"The family is still eager for her return home but is willing to accept her stay in the United States if that's her desire," Qays Hatim Zu'bi, a lawyer and spokesman for the Bahraini royal family, told the Associated Press.

Al-Khalifa faces charges in U.S. immigration court that she entered the country illegally last year. She flew with Johnson to Chicago from Bahrain last fall bearing phony military identification and fake travel orders. The two were subsequently married in November.

But in order to receive permanent resident status as the spouse of a U.S. citizen, she will have to prove that she qualifies for political asylum on grounds that returning to Bahrain would put her life in jeopardy.

Rick Kenney, a spokesman for the immigration courts, said the family's comments would probably have little bearing on the charges against Al-Khalifa. And legal experts said the family's apparently conciliatory stance could undercut her asylum request by appearing to remove the risk of reprisals should she return to her native country.



Associated Press

Meriam Al-Khalifa, holding hand of her husband, Marine Pfc. Jason Johnson, faces possible deportation.

But even if relatives accept Al-Khalifa's move to the United States, Islamic fundamentalists and others in Bahrain might not forgive a decision by a member of the royal family to marry a non-Muslim, said Stephen Knight, coordinating attorney with the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies at UC's Hastings College of Law in San Francisco.

"The prominence of the case seems to add more risk," Knight said.

On the other hand, he said, the royal family's comments could open the way for the two governments to settle the matter quietly.

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