

U.S.

Landlord Lets Reporters Into San Bernardino Suspects' Home

By RICK ROJAS DEC. 4, 2015

REDLANDS, Calif. — There was the can of baby formula left on the counter, and the dishes stacking up in the kitchen sink. A cookies-and-cream ice cream cake sat in the freezer, half-eaten. And upstairs, in one of the bedrooms, a white crib had been piled high with pillows, blankets and toys for a baby.

On Friday, dozens of journalists from around the world crammed into a two-story townhouse, elbowing their way in to see the residence that suddenly became a notorious crime scene, apparently used as both a family home and a bomb-making factory. There, spread across the bathroom counter, were the family photographs; elsewhere, strewn on a bed, were papers, business cards and California driver's licenses.

The home in this quiet suburb, just a few miles from the scene of an attack that left 14 people dead, belonged to the suspects, Syed Rizwan Farook, 28, and Tashfeen Malik, 29. The couple lived there with his mother, according to the family's lawyers, and their daughter, who was born May 21. The house had been scoured by law enforcement, and then, with the permission of the landlord, it was the journalists' turn.

They perused closets and cabinets. A television reporter asked his producer to check the family's calendar to see if anything had been marked down for Dec. 2 (it did not appear so). Some news channels showed live images from inside the home; one network had a commentator walking through with a camera crew, narrating the

tour from room to room. The New York Times also had a reporter and a photographer inside the home.

But instead of a cache of weapons or parts for making explosives — which the authorities had removed — they found what would have looked like a relatively normal cluttered household, notwithstanding a shredded front door that had been ripped from its hinges and cast aside as law enforcement officers broke in.

There were signs throughout the home of the residents' Muslim faith: the sticker pasted on a chest of drawers ("Praise be to Allah Who relieved me from suffering and gave me relief"). And there were the books: "The Characteristics of the Prophet Muhammad" in a linen closet and "Common Mistakes Regarding Prayer" on a bedside table.

As images spread on television and the Internet, concerns were raised about whether the free-for-all at the house jeopardized the integrity of a site that had just been handled as a crime scene. Some commentators criticized the exploration of the contents of a private home as invasive.

Questions even came up in a White House news briefing on Friday. Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary, referred the questions to the F.B.I.; Mr. Earnest said he was "just watching it like the rest of you."

F.B.I. officials confirmed that they had searched the home and were finished.

The F.B.I. director, James B. Comey, said at a news conference in Washington that he had seen the video of the reporters in the townhouse. "I think I'm neither unhappy nor happy," he said. "When we are done with a location, we return it to their rightful owners and we have to leave an inventory under the law about what was taken. So, people got to see our great criminal justice system in action."

On Friday morning, after the authorities were finished, the owner, Doyle Miller, arrived to assess its condition. He allowed journalists inside the house (though not the garage, which the authorities say was where the bombs were made).

"That just opened the flood," Mr. Miller's wife, Judy, said in a brief interview. "It got way out of hand."

After the criticism emerged of the live coverage, CNN and Fox News said in statements that they had been allowed inside by the landlord and were cautious about what they showed on air. CNN said it avoided “close-up footage of any material that could be considered sensitive or identifiable, such as photos or ID cards,” and Fox said the same.

On MSNBC, however, the reporter on the scene displayed photographs. “Let’s not show the child, Kerry,” the anchor, Andrea Mitchell, told the reporter, Kerry Sanders. “Let’s cut away from that.” The network later apologized, saying it “should not have been aired without review.”

Toni Hulbert, a neighbor here in Redlands, was watching CNN when she saw the drama unfolding on live television just two blocks from her home of 40 years. “All we had to worry about was wannabe punks,” said Ms. Hulbert, 63, who walked over to see the situation in person. She did not go inside.

Ms. Hulbert, who had owned a scuba shop in town, was alarmed to learn that such an attack had been conceived so close to her home. But the scene on Friday, she said, was “just as scary.”

Since she had arrived, reporters asked if she knew the family, with some showing her photographs they had taken of family members, including the infant daughter. “I don’t want to see a baby exploited,” she said.

It felt “like a violation,” said her husband, Rick Hulbert, a retired Redlands police officer.

David S. Chesley, a lawyer for the Farook family, said the journalists were invading the family’s personal space and sending out pictures of people who are not involved in the case.

Before long, with the help of police officers, the landlord cleared the reporters out of the house and reinstalled the plywood barrier they had placed in front, yet again entombing the family’s possessions inside.

Correction: December 5, 2015

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article misspelled the

surname of a lawyer for the Farook family. He is David S. Chesley, not Chelsey.

Reporting was contributed by John Koblin, Christine Hauser and Alan Schwarz from New York, Michael S. Schmidt and C. J. Chivers from Washington, and Jim Wilson from San Bernardino.

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