

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

April 1, 2019

American Survivor of Egyptian Attack on Tourists Aims to Halt Boeing Sale

Former pro roller skater who was permanently disabled in wrongful 2015 airstrike that killed 12, lobbies U.S. to block Cairo's planned purchase of 10 Apache helicopters unless she is fully compensated

By Jessica Donati and Jared Malsin

April Corley was a champion roller skater who had toured the world with Madonna and recently had met the love of her life. Rafael Bejarano was a musician, a self-taught healer who had planned a special vacation for them in Egypt.

Mr. Bejarano wanted her to see the White Desert, and had a gift to give her during the trip in September 2015. Ms. Corley imagined it might be a marriage proposal. But she would never find out.

When their tour group stopped near the desert road for lunch, an Egyptian military Boeing AH-64 Apache helicopter attacked them with rockets and 30 mm rounds, killing Mr. Bejarano and 11 other people, including eight Mexican tourists. Wounded by bullets and shrapnel, Ms. Corley was left for dead in the wreckage of bodies and vehicles about 230 miles southwest of Cairo.

In her first interview since then, Ms. Corley told The Wall Street Journal it has taken her more than three years to be able to speak about the attack that has left her permanently disabled.

“My dreams have been crushed,” said 40-year-old Ms. Corley, describing a life of constant pain, medical care and severe post-traumatic stress disorder. She survived the initial aftermath by praying to Mr. Bejarano and imagining that her spirit was more than a mind and body.

Ms. Corley has decided to go public with her cause, hoping to stop a \$1 billion U.S. sale of 10 more Apache helicopters, a deal announced in late 2018, until the Egyptian government agrees to compensation to cover her soaring medical bills. In Washington this week, she is seeking to rally support for her case.

Ms. Corley is pressing her case amid heightened congressional scrutiny of American support for its Arab military allies. Congress recently voted to cut support to the Saudi Arabia-led coalition fighting in Yemen, where more than 10,000 people have died.

Egypt's military is fighting a yearslong war with jihadist militants—primarily in the northern Sinai Peninsula and the Western Desert, where the 2015 attack near Bahariya, a popular starting point for trips to the White Desert, took place against a Mexican tourist convoy that included Ms. Corley.

Close observers of Egypt also say the government's political crackdown and heavy-handed approach to counterterrorism have destabilized parts of the country and the wider region. In the initial months of the most recent military offensive in Sinai in 2018, the military destroyed more than 3,000 homes. As many as 20,000 families had fled by last year as the military destroyed houses, schools, and other civilian infrastructure, the Journal reported.

The 2015 attack on the tourist convoy became a symbol of the chaotic nature of Egypt's war on militant groups. Egypt's Interior Ministry said at the time that the helicopter pilots had mistaken the convoy for a militant encampment, but never explained how the mistake took place and why the air raid continued for several hours. The ministry also said the tour group had entered a banned area, although the group was traveling with an official permit and with a police escort.

Egyptian officials didn't respond to a request for comment on Ms. Corley's saga and her unsettled claims against Egypt.

Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, sponsored legislation requiring the State Department to report on her case, and lawmakers have voted to hold up Egyptian military aid over the country's human-rights record. The Obama and Trump administrations have signed waivers each year, allowing the aid to be released.

Mr. Leahy said he is willing to take further steps to help her but needs bipartisan support. On Friday, he sent a letter cosigned with House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey (D., N.Y.) to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to halt the sale of the 10 Apache helicopters until Ms. Corley is given fair compensation.

The State Department declined to comment on details of Ms. Corley's case.

The Mexican government covered all hospital and travel expenses for the Mexican survivors and their families, including psychological support, said Mr. Bejarano's mother, Marisela Rangel Davalos, one of the six Mexican survivors.

Mrs. Davalos, who had organized the tour with friends, said her son and Ms. Corley had been dancing to music before the attack started, and it was the last time she saw him alive.

After the start of the attack, the helicopter returned to the scene multiple times, she said, firing rockets at first, and then following with strafing runs and a chemical gas that forced survivors to emerge from cover.

“It was very hard to see my friends die, because it was very painful and very slow. Some of them took three hours to die,” Ms. Davalos said, describing the long wait for help.

As the only American survivor, Ms. Corley couldn't board a plane sent to Egypt by the Mexican government to transport the injured. Mrs. Davalos felt terrible about leaving her alone at the hospital.

“My heart was crying for her,” she said, “April was in a very bad situation.”

The Egyptian government has offered Ms. Corley \$140,000 in damages—not enough to cover even the cost of her medical evacuation. The chartered flight had to stop nine times to fly at low altitude for her to survive the journey to California.

Ms. Corley's attorneys estimate she is due damages of more than \$14 million including medical costs, lost income, and her pain and suffering, a figure that is less than settlements in other comparable cases.

When she roller-skated for a living, Ms. Corley toured the world and worked with celebrities, once performing at a birthday party for the singer Usher. Before going to Egypt, she had starred with two friends in a successful music video by the performer Chet Faker that had more than 186 million views on YouTube and won for “Best Choreography” at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2015, the year of the attack.

Ms. Corley remembers the video shoot as one of the happiest moments of her life.

“It was the moment that all those years of training had paid off and we could really enjoy ourselves,” Ms. Corley said, adding that she still enjoys keeping track of new talent and moves.

She also keeps many of her skates even though she won't be able to use them again, her promising career cut short.

“Giving up my roller skates has been an emotional thing for me...it's that last thing that makes me feel, I'm still me,” she said.

Back in California following the attack, Ms. Corley began the long and painful process of attempting to recover from wounds that required 10 surgeries and intensive physical therapy. At first, she was unable to eat, bathe or sit up on her own. Over time, she has regained an increasing range of motion, including the ability to walk with pain.

The attack left her with severe PTSD. The sight of a civilian helicopter in the sky was enough to give her a paralyzing bout of anxiety.

“Emotionally and spiritually, she’s broken,” said Janet Scofidio, a friend who hosted Ms. Corley in her house for a year following her hospitalization.

Ms. Corley said she still harbors dreams of again finding love.

“I would like to have a family. But I’m very hesitant about relationships,” Ms. Corley said. “I’ve just been robbed now of these last few years and I’m not sure I have much time left to do that.”

Write to Jessica Donati at jessica.donati@wsj.com and Jared Malsin at jared.malsin@wsj.com