

Merrill Lynch pays Iranian \$1.5m for ethnic discrimination

IranTimes: Merrill Lynch has agreed to pay \$1.55 million to settle a federal lawsuit charging the giant securities firm with discriminating against an Iranian Muslim employee. The Manhattan-based firm was sued in June 2007 over claims it discriminated on the basis of both ethnicity and religion against former quantitative analyst Majid Borumand, who had been with the company for three years before he was fired in mid-2005. Notice of Merrill Lynch's settlement with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was filed December 30 in federal court in Manhattan. According to the settlement, Merrill Lynch will pay Borumand \$713,333 in back pay, \$356,667 in compensatory damages and \$480,000 for legal fees. In addition, Merrill Lynch will give one hour of training about religious discrimination to its technology group employees. The company is also required to inform the EEOC of any future discrimination complaints. Mahdi Bray, the director of the Washington-based advocacy group Muslim American Society, told Bloomberg news, "I support the concept of training, because sometimes discrimination isn't out of malice; it's just people who don't know better." The suit against Merrill Lynch was not filed by Borumand, but by the EEOC, which enforces workplace antidiscrimination laws. In its fivepage 2007 complaint, the EEOC said Borumand was told: "The reason that you are not allowed on the trading floor is because you are from a country which has a high risk factor and a threat." The EEOC complaint said, "Mr. Borumand was subject to a number of remarks that reflected animus towards his national original and religion." Borumand emigrated from Iran more than 16 years ago on a student visa and moved to New York after completing graduate school in Wisconsin. The Iranian-American analyst, who has a doctorate in theoretical physics and a master's degree in math-



ematical finance, began working at Merrill Lynch in 2002 as a quantitative analyst. The EEOC said Merrill Lynch promoted a less-qualified person in mid-2005 and then fired Borumand, specifically because of his Iranian ethnicity and Muslim religion. Borumand was barred from sitting on the trading floor with the other quantitative analysts in his group. He said he did not wear a beard, pray at work, or say or do anything overtly religious or political. "The mere fact that I was an Iranian with Muslim heritage was suspicious," said Borumand. Merrill Lynch for its part denied the charges when they were filed a year-and-a-half ago. "We regret the EEOC believes there are grounds for its filing," the company said. "Mr. Borumand claims that he was treated improperly because of his national origins or faith. We respectfully—but strongly—disagree with the EEOC and deny Mr. Borumand's allegations." Borumand's case is not the first in which Merrill Lynch employees have filed suits on the basis of discrimination. A complaint filed in 2005 in U.S. District Court in Chicago on behalf of African-American brokers accused the firm of discrimination on the basis of race; that litigation is continuing. In the late 1990s, Merrill Lynch agreed to pay more than \$100 million to resolve gender bias claims by more than 900 female brokers. And in 1974, the EEOC sued the firm for failing to hire women and minorities as brokers. Merrill settled that suit by hiring more women and minority brokers. Merrill Lynch was a victim of the global financial meltdown last year. It is in the process of being acquired by the Bank of America. The settlement was reached only days before the acquisition is due to be finalized.

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Iran: Hot Tea ...

tain events are taking place. In the end, we chose to make the film more subtle and stay out of divisive political rhetoric as much as possible.

Q: I was at your San Jose movie premiere and lucky to get in as there was standing room only. The film made me weep because it did such an effective job of portraying what marvelous humanity exists there which was my experience as well. I was so impressed that I immediately called Jerry Dekker from the parking lot to tell him how great it was and what a star he had been and I e-mailed Farzaneh in Tehran to tell her the same thing when I got back to my lap top. What was your favorite part of the film?

A: There were so many great moments that I could talk about.

Q: Yeah like that segment with everybody riding the donkeys.

A: That again was completely spontaneous. We saw the donkeys alongside the road and pulled over. The owners let us ride them and then we all ended up having lunch together.

Q: Well I could tell you guys were definitely having fun especially the girls.

A: One of the ladies on our trip ran over and tried to get on a donkey. She had been studying Persian in school and her language acquisition really blossomed when she was totally immersed in the culture. The donkey owners had been just taking a lunch break when suddenly out of nowhere this American lady was trying to ride their donkeys. It was really quite hysterical.

Q: Another moment in the film which I found interesting was when you ran into a Jamaican Muslim professor at the holy shrine of Hazrat-e-Masoumeh in Qom, who took it upon himself to represent and explain to your small group, the Shiite political perspective and how they view the motives of the West.

A: I was particularly impressed by how open he was and also the mullahs there in their willingness to discuss politics and world religions with us. They shared their lunch with us and then acted as our tour guides around the shrine.

Q: What are some other memorable high points from the film for you?

A: When we got to Takht-e-Suleiman, the old Zoroastrian unofficial archeologist and

Takht-e-Suleiman guide., Azzi, who had assisted the German archeologists in the original excavation of the site in the 1930's, really struck a cord with me. The Germans at that time of the Nazi era were obsessed with finding their Aryan roots. Anyway Azzi was still a practicing Zoroastrian and for some reason I just felt really comfortable talking with him and really enjoyed spending time with him. In fact I would consider meeting him the high point of my trip. I just feel like there was a spiritual connection made between us. I felt that there was something extra sacred about that entire site and a lot of energy was emanating from it. He taught me the fundamental principles of Zoroaster which were: Think Well, Speak Well, Do Well and then all your endeavors will be successful because they have the right motivation. I took these words into my heart and they kept me going during the editing and completion of this film once I returned home.

Q: What a moving experience this has been for you, that the very first monotheistic religion could, thousands of years later, exert such an influence over you. In closing I want to thank you very much from my heart for making this film because the cause is the same one which makes me write. I have a deep love for Iran and for peace. I wish you every success and hope and pray that millions of people get to see this film in the West and in Iran and worldwide and whatever I can do to help you promote this film would be my privilege.

A: I am very grateful for this interview and, for me, the cause is also the most important thing. Peace was the motivation behind the film but the ultimate message is citizen diplomacy. I am hoping to demonstrate it by this film and to inspire ordinary people of every walk of life and nationality, that they have the ability to empower and represent themselves independently of any government and that essentially humanity shares more in common than what divides it. Ultimately this is all about overcoming our fears through healthy dialogue.

Q: In closing how can our readers obtain a DVD copy of your film or go to a screening in a theatre.

A: For all up-dates on screenings please go to www.iranthemovie.com. Our plan is to have DVD copies available for purchase through our website and other distribution channels within the next few weeks.

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Two stoned...

" Agence France Presse reported that it has counted five stonings since Shahrudi's 2002 order suspending stonings. Jamshidi, Shahrudi's spokesman, said "judges are independent and they are likely not to act to the Judiciary chairman's advice as long as the law remains unchanged." But Shahrudi has the authority to overturn a sentence of stoning and reportedly has done just that in several cases. According to Iranian law, only adultery is punishable by stoning, which involves burying a male up to his waist and a female up to her shoulders and allowing the public to throw stones at them until they die. The convict is spared death if he or she can free themselves from the hole. In July 2007, the Islamic Republic drew international outrage by stoning to death convicted adulterer Jafar Kiani. Kiani's partner, Mokarrameh Ebrahimi, was spared execution and released from prison in Qazvin province. After Kiani's stoning, Shahrudi's office said he had not approved the stoning. It has never been made clear whether the local provincial judge acted on his own au-

thority or if Shahrudi was overruled—only Supreme Leader Ali Khamenehi has the authority to overrule Shahrudi. Two months ago, Iran's Supreme Court upheld the execution by stoning of a woman convicted of adultery in Shiraz. Etemad-e Melli on November 29 said the high court upheld the stoning sentence—along with another sentence of execution by hanging—against the female adulterer who was also convicted of killing her husband with the help of her lover. The convicted man was sentenced to 15 years in prison for his role as an accomplice in the murder. He was also sentenced to 100 lashes for his adultery conviction—but was spared execution. Although the ruling is considered final, Shahrudi and Khamenehi are both authorized to overrule the death sentences. According to Etemad-e Melli's Sunday report that quoted rights activists, eight female and two male convicts are currently under sentence of stoning in Iranian prisons, while the sentence has been commuted for four other women. According to an Agence France Presse count, Iran last year executed at least 246 people. In 2007, Iran's total of 317 executions in 2007 exceeded those of any other country apart from China, according to Amnesty International.

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Nafisi...

ily photographs. In a recent interview with National Public Radio (NPR), Nafisi explained why she decided to write a second memoir. "I had it all planned that after I finish writing 'Reading Lolita in Tehran,' I will write a book that I had in mind for a long time called 'Republic of Imagination,' which was about this subversive role of imagination, you know, in terms of our political and social life. And then, as I was writing the acknowledgements to 'Reading Lolita in Tehran,' my mother died. And I had already been sort of obsessed with her and my own relationship with her, but her death threw me into a state of panic. "And I started thinking about her and about our own relationship and how could I retrieve her in some way, now that she was forever gone. And then a year after my mother's death in December 2004, my father died. And after that, memories kept leaping out and I was drawn to begin at that personal moment when I became conscious of them and then put that within the historical context." In "Things I've Been Silent About," Nafisi fleshes out stories left untold or half-told in her earlier work: her upbringing in a prominent family; her education in Switzerland, England and the United States; her hasty first marriage; her return to Iran during the lead up to the 1979 revolution; her teaching career under clerical rule; her second marriage and her two children, now aged 23 and 24. The memoir, she writes, is "a response to my own inner censor and inquisitor." The revolution, which destroyed the certainties of her family's life, made remembrance all the more important for Nafisi.

"If the present was fragile and fickle, the past could become a surrogate home," she writes, adding that she hopes the memoir will bring her some peace. Much of the peace she hopes to achieve is with her memories of her mother, whom Nafisi describes as very demanding and controlling. Nafisi said, "From the [first] moment that I can remember, the relationship was a very paradoxical one. On one hand, she was very loving and attention-giving. On the other hand, she was also very domineering.... And she wanted me... to be perfect in everything. There was no pleasing her ever, and I felt that she kept wanting to shape me according to the image she had of what she wanted me to become. "But, you know, writing this book, I also discovered her vulnerability, that despite her domineering per-

sonality, she suffered all her life from a lack—her own mother having died when she was so very young; her first husband, with whom she was so much in love on the first night of their wedding, discovered that he was going to die of a disease that he had never told her about before their wedding. And she always wanted to be a public woman, an independent woman, and that dream was never fulfilled. So, I realized how much she tried to invest in me. And that put a great burden on me. But in some ways, she gave a lot in order for me to become independent and to fulfill her dream in a sense." Nafisi described her father and her relationship with him as the exact opposite. She told NPR, "In many ways, he was the exact opposite of her. He was very tender and very gentle. I mention in my book—and I still have that diary he wrote when I was about four years old, where he addresses it to me as his confidant. Obviously, at the age of four, I could not really play that role, but that is the role he cast for me, you know?" Her father was jailed under the Shah's regime from 1963 until 1968. The injustice, Nafisi recounted, caused the family to support the opposition that eventually toppled the monarchy, only to face an even more repressive regime, one Nafisi is highly critical of. But Nafisi's complicated relationship with her parents was not the only aspect of life she wanted to make peace with. In her book, Nafisi also described being sexually abused at the age of six by a religious figure she does not name. She explained that writing the book and coming out with her abuse as a child and her relationship with her mother didn't necessarily bring her closure, but allowed her to confront it in such a way that the memories became more tolerable. "Perhaps the most common of all narratives is one about absent parents and the urgent need to fill the void created by their deaths. The process does not lead to closure—at least for me—but to understanding," Nafisi writes. "With writing," Nafisi told NPR, "you imposed a form of harmony upon the chaos of life, and with writing, you make all those moments that are so fleeting enduring. So, you're sort of challenging the transience and fickleness of life. And there is always an enduring aspect to beauty; it is both transient in real life and enduring in art. And I hope I have been able to have enough distance from my own personal experience to also achieve some beauty."

