

Lotus officials say travel ban could affect festival

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While music can be danceable or uplifting, it also can be political. But the opportunity for international musicians to spread their messages against evil may be diminished if the travel ban enacted by President Donald Trump is extended.

Bloomington is home to the Lotus World Music and Arts Festival — an event that welcomes international artists as a way "to create opportunities to experience, celebrate and explore the diversity of the world's cultures, through music and the arts," according to its mission statement.

Of the seven countries currently affected by the ban — Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen and Libya — the festival has welcomed artists from six. The Lotus Blossoms event, held in the spring and geared toward K-12 students, will feature four artists this year, including Rahim Alhaj, a master oud musician who is an Iraqi political refugee.

Sunni Fass, executive director of Lotus Education and Arts Foundation, said Alhaj left Iraq after the first Gulf War when he became a target due to his opposition to Saddam Hussein. Fass said Alhaj lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and is an American citizen now, so the planned concerts will go on as scheduled. But there are concerns about what the future holds.



Rahim AlHaj, virtuoso oud musician and composer, was born in Baghdad, Iraq and began playing the oud (the grandfather of all stringed instruments) at age nine. The Iraqi musician now lives in New Mexico and is scheduled to perform at Lotus Blossoms in March.

Tristra Yeager, campaign manager for Rock Paper Scissors, a music and technology public relations firm, has more pressing concerns.

"We have already had to field some rather panicked calls from artists who are touring the U.S. right now," she said.

The company has a lot on the line. "There's been a general chilling effect, and that promises to have a pretty major impact on our business overall," Yeager said.

Yeager said the company provides a living not only for its artists, but also for the 12 people employed in the Bloomington office. The company has an international stable of

artists, and Yeager said it has never been easy for musicians to get a visa. "We've dealt with people from all those countries," she said, adding that sometimes Iranian musicians must travel to Turkey in order to get a visa.

Fass said Lotus has experienced problems with bands getting visas in time for their scheduled performance. In years past, the festival has had to rework schedules when an act was unable to appear.

That problem was exacerbated in 2014, when a computer glitch at the U.S. State Department caused a backlog of 200,000 applications. A similar problem in 2015 also led to a backlog.

Fass said that with that glitch, some artists started their tours in Canada in order to be able to enter the U.S. to continue performing.

"The 'I have a concert to play' (reason) tends to not always be at the top of the priority list," Fass said about how applications are given urgency when there's a hitch.

Understanding how difficult it can be for musicians to get a visa is a key piece of information that many Americans may not understand.

"There are already a lot of obstacles in place that I don't think most Americans are aware of, because they've never had to deal with it," Yeager said.

Fass said that while the artists for Lotus Blossoms won't have any issues with performing in March and early April, the lineup for this fall's Lotus World Music and Arts Festival may see an impact.

For example, when and if the visa system is restarted, there will again be a backlog that may mean paperwork won't be completed in time. "The concern is also, is this going to be expanded to other countries? Is the ban still going to be in place?" Fass said.

With so much still unclear, Fass said, the ban may affect how the festival chooses artists.

"We certainly have a parallel list of artists who are based in the U.S., and we often try to have the bulk of artists that are not based in the U.S. This may have to be one of those years where we are looking more towards artists that are from one of these countries and based in the U.S. That's certainly one recourse we have," Fass said.

Because music is often used to push a political movement, musicians are often targeted. Fass pointed to Mali in 2012 when Islamic extremists captured an area of the country. "One of the first things they did was start targeting musicians and cracking down on music and public performance," Fass said.

Yeager said extremists are opposed to music and see it as an evil. "I don't think it's possible to be a radical Islamist and a musician," Yeager said.

As a result, musicians are fearful of extremists.

"I know people whose fathers have been shot on stage. I don't know how uninformed one must be to not understand that basic principle," Yeager said.

The potential expansion or extension of the travel ban also makes Fass more determined to spread the mission of Lotus. The festival seeks to bring various cultures face to face as humans. By being in such a place, it makes it easier to understand and accept each other despite the differences.

But even for those who don't attend Lotus, Yeager said simply listening to music from other countries can help people become more understanding of other cultures. Her dream is that all people have the ability to access world music regularly so they can better understand the world around them.

"It's imperative that we keep these ties open, because there's so many people out there in the world that want the same things we do," Yeager said.

Fass said she will be staying on top of any developments regarding international travel.

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"Again, it's always concerning that this idea of artists and musicians, who in many ways are best suited to be ambassadors for their country and their culture, are being prevented from traveling by this kind of ban," Fass said. "Personal connection is the only way we're all ever going to understand each other, and we need more opportunities for people to find that connection with someone from the other side of the world."

Yeager is concerned about how travel bans will affect Rock Paper Scissors.

"We're a small business. We're a small business that employs 12 Hoosiers, and nobody cares. We provide livings not only for artists, but a lot of other people. It's a real shame that everyone seems to not understand that here. My colleagues' livelihood is at stake," she said.