

War hasn't disrupted life for Atikokanite in Egypt

Jacqueline Boileau

"The risk is probably greater over there."

Melanie Kaartinen just started her second year at the American School of Alexandria in Egypt, and we thought we'd check up on how things have been going since the terrorist attacks on the U.S. and the subsequent war against Afghanistan. Egypt is supportive of the U.S. war effort.

Kaartinen was in the middle of taking an Arabic lesson when news of the attack came over the television.

"I just couldn't believe it. It was surreal. I was glued to the TV most of the night," she said.

The school was closed September 12 and, at the urging of the U.S. embassy, Kaartinen remained in her home for 24 hours. She e-mailed her sister to let her know she was fine, and asked her to pass the message on to her parents.

Kaartinen reports that many people were frightened by the scenes on CNN of extremists cheering the American tragedy, but only one member of her staff returned to Canada.

"We had one teacher from Toronto leave. She didn't tell any of us she was leaving - she went on a 3 a.m. flight."

After the initial shock of the attack, little has changed in Kaartinen's life, and a rare discussion of the issue among staff at her school showed most felt the same. (Because of the

controversial nature of Middle East relations, staff are discouraged from bringing up the subject at work.)

"The general consensus of all the North American staff - about 20 of us - is [there] no threat in Egypt at this time. Islamic fundamentalists don't represent Islam. I feel safe over here - it's quiet, really. It feels exactly the same as last year. I'm not in [Pakistan] I'm away over here in Egypt."

Many Egyptians have approached her to say how sorry they are for what happened in 'her' country (she hastens to explain she's Canadian, not American), and to encourage her not to leave.

"In all reality, I'm safer here than back home. If Canada gets into this and there's retaliation, it's more likely to occur back in North America."

As a 6-foot tall white woman, Kaartinen stands out clearly as a Westerner, something that could conceivably make her a target for extremists, but she has no intentions of letting it run her life.

"There's always that risk, but it's not strong enough to keep me in my house, locked up. I'm going to the disco in Cairo this weekend to celebrate [a friend's] birthday. There's always a risk but something could happen [even if I were back] in Toronto. I don't want to leave. I really like my life over here. It's really bad this had to happen."