

NEWS

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Saudi children not to benefit from the global Arts Olympiad nor represent their Kingdom at the World Children's Festival 2015 in Washington

WASHINGTON -- The International Child Art Foundation (ICAF) announced today that Saudi children will not participate in its 5th Arts Olympiad and its 5th World Children's Festival (WCF). This situation arose because Saudi Aramco inexplicably scuttled a two-year long stretch of discussions on the ICAF program to inspire Saudi children to become the new makers and creators so they could aspire to transform their towns and cities into creative clusters.

In November 2012, at the request of a prominent Saudi woman artist, the ICAF prepared a program outline for Aramco. In January 2013, Aramco assigned Laila Al Faddagh to work with the ICAF. Ms. Faddagh mentioned that the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture that Aramco was building was scheduled to open in 2016 and that the ICAF mission and work were closely aligned with the Center's objectives and plans.

Over the course of the next several months, a three-phase program was negotiated. The ICAF hence engaged a team of experts, including eminent educators from Teachers College Columbia University, Berkeley, and Claremont Graduate University. The program was to start in late 2013 in three phases. In the first phase the ICAF team would provide formal pedagogical training to Saudi art teachers so they could properly organize the 5th Arts Olympiad in their schools. The world's largest and most prestigious children's art program, the Arts Olympiad introduces children to the *Artist-Athlete Ideal* of a creative mind and healthy body. Children depict themselves as artist-athletes in their artwork, thus embodying the ideal and averting diminishing creativity and rising obesity risks.

The second phase centered on mobilizing community support for children's creative development through exhibitions in the Kingdom of children's works and the selection of the winners by community leaders prior to the 5th Arts Olympiad deadline of December 31, 2014. In the third phase, the Arts Olympiad winners representing each province in the Kingdom would participate in the WCF2015—the world's premier international children's educational celebration next July 4th weekend at The National Mall—where Saudi children would co-imagine and co-create with others, foster their creativity, grow global thinking, and develop lifelong bonds of friendship and understanding with American children and children from nearly one hundred other countries.

In December 2013, Norah Zamil replaced Ms. Faddagh as the Aramco point person for the program. In the ensuing months the program and its timeline were revised. Now the ICAF team was requested to train 20 to 30 Saudi art teachers who would then, as Master Trainers, train teachers across the Kingdom. The ICAF was asked not to include lesson plans on music and photography, to which the team reluctantly agreed because of Saudi cultural sensitivities despite the ICAF's own research on cognitive benefits of music education and the importance of photography in visual learning.

The timeline was revised again because of delays in Aramco's approval. On April 7, 2014, Ms. Norah emailed the ICAF that "everything is going well, and our Minister Prince Khalid Al Faisal, is very looking forward to this program to happen! We have his support!" On June 18th she wrote: "Yesterday we have presented to our manager and general manager and we got positive feedback. Hopefully and shortly, we will get back to you when the contract is signed." She alerted the ICAF that she was leaving Aramco for graduate studies in Boston and introduced an expatriate colleague, Ryan Griffith, as the program point person.

The many delays by Aramco precluded the ICAF from directly contacting those Saudi schools that have an online presence to invite them to participate in the 5th Arts Olympiad. When repeatedly pressed for an update, Mr. Griffith finally emailed on September 16th: "The contracting process is currently underway and all parties will be contacted at the appropriate time by a designated Saudi Aramco representative as per Saudi Aramco contracts policy." He did not respond to subsequent emails from the ICAF.

On December 2, 2014, Aramco Contracts Advisor Essam Al Braik wrote: "The contract is in hold by our management, company rules and procedures: potential tenders, should not be in contact with Project champion, all your correspondences should be through contracting department or Contracts representative." The ICAF immediately requested clarification of this absurd allegation. On December 10, 2014, Mr. Braik replied: "Following our management reviews and our future corporate strategies, we have determined that we will not be participating in the Art Olympiad for 2015."

"For the world's largest oil company to take away two years of a charity's precious time and that of eminent American educators without any recompense is inconsiderate and immoral," said Dr. Ashfaq Ishaq, founder and chair of the ICAF. "We will miss the Saudi children at their world festival. We would like for them to know that we tried our very best to bring our unparalleled expertise and global experience to assist them in nurturing their creativity and fostering their critical thinking. We wish for them a creative and peaceful future."

ICAF

The ICAF serves American children as their national arts and creativity organization and world's children as their international arts and creativity organization. Since 1997 a total of 5 million children worldwide have participated in and benefitted from the ICAF's programs, exhibitions and educational festivals. A world leader in children's art and creativity, the ICAF ranks among the top 25 children's charities in the United States.