



Fresno County Sheriff - Coroner's Office

Margaret Mims, Sheriff - Coroner

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News Release

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SAR Successfully Completes Recovery Operation of Bodies in Car Rented by Thai Exchange Students

Around 6:00 this morning, the Fresno County Sheriff's Search and Rescue (SAR) team and the California Highway Patrol began a recovery operation along Highway 180 and the Kings River. Officers and deputies used CHP's helicopter (H40) to insert personnel and equipment into the gorge, on both sides of the river. The goal of the operation was to extract two bodies from a 2016 Hyundai Sonata that has been stuck against a rock since late July. The bodies are presumed to be that of a 28 year old man and 24 year old woman, both residents of Thailand who were enrolled as exchange students at the University of South Florida.

Once everyone was in place, one of our SAR deputies made his way out to the car and secured it by attaching a cable to the car from a device called a Griphoist, which is basically a manual winch system. Deputies on the side of the river tethered the Griphoist to a rock and then slowly ratcheted it, pulling it a short distance into slower moving water. This made conditions much safer for deputies to access the car. The team then used tools to get inside the car and were able to free both bodies. Deputies hoisted each body up to the crew aboard H40 and they flew the bodies to the road side where a coroner transportation unit was stationed. Family members met the transport team at Convict Flat Campground where they were able to perform a short ritual.

The following is a recap of what brought us to this point today. It was on the night of July 26th that the California Highway Patrol and Fresno

County Sheriff's Office were notified of a traffic accident. A vehicle traveling on Hwy. 180 near Convict Flat and Horseshoe Bend went through a guard rail, off a 500 foot cliff and into the Kings River. CHP immediately contacted the Sheriff's Office and asked deputies to search the canyon for a vehicle. Members of the Sheriff's Office performed a search the next day and did locate a red car in the river; a 2016 Hyundai Sonata. Records showed it was a rental car belonging to two Thai exchange students, a man named Pakapol Chairatnathrongporn and a woman named Thiwadee Saengsuriyarit. The Sheriff's SAR team then began to evaluate the situation in an effort to remove the car from the Kings River. The location of the wreck included Class 5 rapids and a water flow of 1,500 cubic feet per second, making it too dangerous to conduct a recovery operation. Through the use of aerial photos, CHP was able to see two people deceased inside the car. Conditions were monitored everyday to determine when a recovery operation could take place. The flow of the river gradually decreased and is currently around 400 cfs. Today, SAR felt the conditions were safer to attempt a recovery operation. Retrieving the bodies was and has always been the top priority. The car has been left in the canyon today and will be recovered at a later time. Positive identifications of the bodies have not been made yet. The Coroner's Office will make those determinations during the autopsy process.

The Sheriff's Office and CHP did take photos and video of today's operation. Administrative members of both agencies will be reviewing the material and then make a decision as to which images will be distributed to the media.

In another non-related case, the Sheriff's Office has located vehicle wreckage a short distance downstream from the red car, which is believed to belong to a missing Chinese couple. Their car, a 2012 white Ford Focus, is believed to have crashed sometime between August 6th and August 8th. SAR is not making an attempt to recover this wreckage today. Instead, they will wait for river conditions to improve in order to allow the wreckage to become more accessible. It is still not confirmed whether the wreckage is that of the entire Ford Focus. The bodies of the husband and wife, 31 year old Yinan Wang and 30 year old Jie Song, have still not been seen. An announcement of that recovery operation will be made at a later time.

Sheriff Mims issued the following personal statement.

“I would like to thank the families of the victims for their patience and understanding during this long, difficult process. It’s always been our goal to deliver peace to you so that you could hold the necessary services for your loved ones. Hopefully you may now move forward in the healing process. I would also like to thank Thailand’s U.S. Consulate office in Los Angeles and the greater Thai community for its support throughout this operational planning phase. Having an open line of communication and knowing you were by our side was invaluable. Finally, I want to thank our personnel (deputies and volunteers) and other agencies such as the CHP and Caltrans for their hard work of rising to the challenge and reaching a successful outcome. This truly was a team effort.”