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The never-ending ordeal of Abousfian Abdelrazik

By Paul Koring
From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

How many others have been tossed into foreign prisons after Canadian agents fingered them abroad?

Paul Koring, a Washington-based foreign correspondent for The Globe and Mail, was recently awarded Amnesty International's top prize for human-rights reporting in Canada in 2009. The following is adapted from his acceptance speech.

It is nearly seven years since Abousfian Abdelrazik was picked up - apparently at the behest of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service - and tossed into a Sudanese prison.

It is two years since The Globe and Mail published, across the top of its front page, what would be the first of more than 60 stories about the Canadian citizen's Kafkaesque ordeal.

It is nearly a year since the Harper government bowed to a federal judge's ruling that it had trampled on Mr. Abdelrazik's constitutional rights by keeping him in forced exile and denying him a passport, despite the fact that he has never been charged with any crime.

Mr. Abdelrazik is a Canadian citizen just like most of us. He also happens to be black and Muslim.

But Mr. Abdelrazik didn't just flee to Canada. Once here, instead of refuge, he was denied the very rights that Canada champions. And despite finally being back in Montreal with his children and family, his ordeal isn't over.

Mr. Abdelrazik's bank account - with more than \$10,000 in it, an amount he says was left to him by his wife, who died of cancer - has now been frozen at the behest of the Canadian government.

Mr. Abdelrazik remains on the United Nations blacklist of suspected terrorists. That, according to our government, gives it the right to seize his assets and make it a crime to employ him. But he isn't entitled to know why he's on the blacklist or who put him there. And he doesn't have any right to challenge those unknown accusations.

Irrespective of Mr. Abdelrazik's political views and whether or not Canadian are suspicious about him, his rights shouldn't depend on his popularity or the whims of the state. And they shouldn't depend on whether an unidentified country made unspecified accusations without any need to substantiate them to a secret UN committee.

We had no idea where this story would lead when we started covering it. Frankly, it seemed like an odd situation about a Canadian who couldn't return home but hardly the stuff of constitutional precedent or the inalienable rights of all citizens.

But as the layers of government deceit and obstruction slowly were peeled away, it became shockingly evident that agents of the state, acting on orders of cabinet ministers, had willfully treated a citizen in - at best - a bizarre, arbitrary and inexplicable fashion.

For the first few months, the Abdelrazik story attracted almost no attention. It didn't have the "America-bashing" buzz of the Maher Arar case, and there was no partisan card to play. And there was no immediate protest from ordinary Canadians, although that would eventually come.

If this is an proud example of journalism in the public interest, it's because of the power of The Globe to force an issue onto the national agenda, to compel even the most recalcitrant of ministers and an apathetic public to confront a grievous wrong.

Quite frankly, this story would have fizzled out for lack of interest had not The Globe devoted enormous amounts of space, money and prominence to it.

It's been nearly a year since Mr. Abdelrazik came home, yet his ordeal is still unfolding. What we don't know is how many other Canadians have been tossed into foreign prisons after Canadian agents fingered them abroad.

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