

The latest outrage: Just say no

Why more than 100 strangers are risking arrest and imprisonment by helping fly a fellow Canadian home from surreal exile in Khartoum

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Globe and Mail Update

March 13, 2009 at 4:25 PM EDT

For six years now, Canadian governments have been systematically destroying the life of yet another Canadian citizen whose name or religion seems enough to make him a terrorist suspect. This time it's a Montrealer named Abousfian Abdelrazik, who, for the past 10 months, has lived a surrealistic existence in the waiting room of the Canadian embassy in Khartoum.

Mr. Abdelrazik's story has been covered by Paul Koring in The Globe and Mail and raised in Parliament for almost a year by Paul Dewar, the NDP foreign affairs critic. His astonishing saga could well be called Franz Kafka Meets Catch-22.

Six years ago, Mr. Abdelrazik went to visit his mother in Sudan. To his astonishment, and with the usual lack of evidence, both the Bush government and CSIS believed him to be a dangerous extremist with high-level ties to al-Qaeda. At the request of Canadian officials, he was twice imprisoned without charge by the Sudanese government for a total of nearly two years. Sudan is notorious for its brutal treatment of prisoners and he was duly beaten and tortured. He was also interrogated by both CSIS and U.S. agents. Plainly "extraordinary rendition" remains an option for the government of Canada, despite assurances after the Maher Arar scandal that things have changed.

While American officials accuse the Sudanese government of genocide in Darfur province, the CIA sees that same government as a trusted ally on so-called terrorist issues. But even the Sudanese concluded that Mr. Abdelrazik had no links to Muslim terrorists and there was no cause to hold him. In 2006, he was released from detention with a Sudanese offer to fly him home.

Not so fast. His nightmare was by no means ended. Apparently because the Americans still regard him as a dangerous extremist - still with no supporting information - the Harper government rejected the flight home. Yet a 2007 External Affairs document reported that both the RCMP and CSIS also agreed there was no evidence linking Abdelrazik to any wrongdoing.

More salt was poured on Mr. Abdelrazik's wounds. Given his obvious innocence, the government asked the United Nations to take him off its travel blacklist; he is there only at the behest of the Bush administration. The U.S. blocked the Canadian request at the Security Council. Yet the UN travel ban is not even in play here since it specifically exempts travel to get home, and Mr. Abdelrazik's home is right here in Canada, where - let it be said again - he is a citizen.

He is also bereft. He no longer has either money or documents. For a while, our government promised him an emergency passport if he could get a flight from Khartoum to Montreal - not easy if you're on the "no fly" list. Finally, last September, Etihad Airways, based in Abu Dhabi, confirmed his flight. Not so fast. The government responded by refusing the promised travel document. His lawyers were told he must possess a pre-paid ticket home before an emergency passport would be granted. Although the Canadian embassy can lend a citizen emergency funds to get back home, Mr. Abdelrazik is getting none. Indeed, he is largely ignored at the embassy and has grown increasingly depressed and abandoned.

Of course there's another Canada that's outraged at this treatment and who'd be glad to contribute a few dollars to help him out. Not so fast. Believe it or not, our government has threatened to lay criminal charges under anti-terrorist legislation against any Canadian who lends or gives money for Mr. Abdelrazik's plane fare. Once again, as at every step, a preposterous new arbitrary barrier is suddenly invented. At this rate, Mr. Abdelrazik may be interned forever in Khartoum, which seems to be the government's intention.

But here's a surprise for Stephen Harper. We're calling your bluff. This time we're telling Ottawa: not so fast. Lots of Canadians are prepared to risk prosecution and defy the ban on funding Abdelrazik. Through an explicit civil disobedience project called Operation Fly Home, a first group of 115 Canadians have so far donated small sums to buy his air ticket home. All of us are making our names and addresses public, so the Mounties won't have trouble finding us. Our crime? Paying \$20 dollars or so to bring home a stranded fellow Canadian whose only crime is his name and religion.

I know very few of my fellow contributors. I assume, like me, they are appalled by the cruel injustice of the treatment meted out to Mr. Abdelrazik, the wholesale violation of all the rights Canadians have the right to take for granted. Maybe too they share my fear that his case acts as a perfect recruiting tool for Muslim terrorists to woo young Muslims to their unholy cause. If these beliefs get the 115 of us thrown into prison - which I would've thought preposterous before learning of Mr. Abdelrazik's story - it will be a badge of honor for us all.

But it won't end there. We are determined to bring Abousfian Abdelrazik home.

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Special to The Globe and Mail