

This is a vile way to treat a citizen

THE GAZETTE MARCH 9, 2009

Even the Sudanese secret police decided he was innocent, but somebody in Ottawa wasn't sure, and so Canadian citizen Abousfian Abdelrazik, a 47-year-old Montrealer, was thrown into a Sudanese jail in 2003, while in that country visiting his mother. Finally freed two years later, he now lives at the Canadian embassy in Khartoum, in a unique confinement.

This Canadian citizen, convicted of nothing, legally charged with nothing, is for practical purposes being confined by the Canadian government.

And if they can do this to him, they can do it to you. Ottawa needs to end this surreal vendetta now and submit Abdelrazik to due legal process or else leave him alone.

Last week the Globe and Mail newspaper made public documents indicating that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service had asked the Sudanese to detain Abdelrazik "for suspected involvement with terrorist elements." A Canadian diplomat had denied that there had been any such request. CSIS still denies what these documents make clear.

There's more, too: Abdelrazik says the Sudanese tortured him, and that Canadian officials knew this. But a Justice Department official later asked him, he says, to claim that scars on his abdomen were from self-mutilation.

Our former Liberal government, and now the Conservative one, have persisted in treating this citizen this way. Look at the absurd Catch-22 he's in now, housed in our Khartoum embassy: For no stated reason, Ottawa refused to issue him a passport, so he can't come home. For some time Ottawa said he could be given a temporary passport - after he booked a flight home. He booked one; they withdrew the offer. Now Ottawa insists he have a fully-paid ticket, but he has no money, and anyone who helps him financially will be charged under anti-terror laws, Ottawa says.

Frankly, we would rather have a dangerous terrorist walking around than accept the idea that Ottawa can condemn a citizen to this sort of quasi-legal hell.

Ultimately, in countries like Canada the awesome power of governments over individuals is held in check only by the slight chains of due process: We are innocent until proven guilty, we have the right to return to our country, we have the right to confront our accusers, and so on. But national-security cases, we are told, can be different: Revealing evidence from secret sources would expose the sources. That argument too easily cloaks the endless potential for abuse of power.

Paul Dewar, a New Democratic MP, calls this "the first case of Canadian rendition." That's the word the George W. Bush administration used for having suspects detained by friendly, if unscrupulous, foreign governments. It's a vile practice.

Every Canadian should be concerned about our government's abusive tactics in this case.

Ottawa's secret war against Abousfian Abdelrazik is a disgrace and a menace. He might be no angel, but he's a Canadian citizen entitled to a fair trial. If they can do this to him, they can do it to you.

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette