

Cheering supporters greet Abdelrazik

Back from Sudan. Montrealer spent six years in exile

BY JAN RAVENSBERGEN, THE GAZETTE JUNE 28, 2009



Montreal, Quebec, Saturday June 27, 2009—Aousfian Abdelrazik return to Montreal from Sudan, where he has been in virtual exile for more than five years.

Photograph by: Marco Campanozzi, THE GAZETTE

MONTREAL -- An exhausted but joyful Aousfian Abdelrazik had just a few words for a noisy, happy welcome-home crowd in his home city just before one a.m. Sunday.

"I am very happy to come back home and to be in this lovely city," he told more than 50 supporters who, accompanied by a brass band, gathered downtown to greet him.

His return followed six years in exile, alleged torture at the hands of Sudanese authorities, several thwarted attempts to return earlier and almost exactly 14 months stranded in exile at the Canadian embassy in Khartoum.

"It is your support that (was able to) make this happen now," Abdelrazik declared, wearing an open-collared shirt and a broad smile. He gave credit to "fellow Canadians and Montrealers, everywhere" for the ultimate success of what sympathizers had dubbed the "Fly-home project."

"Thank you so much," he added, "for everything."

Wafa Sahnine, his 26-year-old stepdaughter, also spoke very briefly:

"We will be using the next few weeks to re-establish our family links," she said.

The long-awaited return of the dual Canadian-Sudanese citizen represents "a moment of hope," Imam Salam Elmanyawi had said an hour earlier, waiting at the corner of Émilie Gamelin Park, near the Berri-UQÀM métro station.

Quietly, off to one side, the Imam, a leader of the city's Muslim community, had moments earlier knelt down on the pavement and written his own simple message on a colourful banner: "Welcome home."

"It took a very long time and we are very concerned for him, that he will be able to re-establish himself," the Imam added.

"We are thankful for the work of the judiciary," which was instrumental in ordering Ottawa to reverse its attempts to keep the Canadian citizen from being able to fly home.

"But," he sighed, "it took a very long time."

Hours earlier, in late afternoon, Abdelrazik raised his right arm and clenched his fist as he walked down the ramp outside the international arrival gates at Toronto's Pearson International Airport.

About 40 supporters carrying signs that read "We did it!" and "Oh Canada! Our home and Abdelrazik's" chanted "Welcome home," as he made his way towards them.

Abdelrazik had an equally brief and almost identical message for those sympathizers:

"I'm very glad to be here; I'm very tired," said the 47-year-old, who has been labelled a terrorist by the United States.

"Thank you so much for your support. Now I'm here," he said before heading eastbound by vehicle down Highway 401, accompanied by his lawyer and others, for the final leg of his lengthy quest for return - the six-hour drive to Montreal to re-unite with his family. The drive took somewhat longer because of a clogged Highway 20 on Montreal Island.

Abdelrazik, born in Sudan, fled that country in 1990. He received refugee status in Canada in 1992 and his Canadian citizenship in 1995.

In 2003, Abdelrazik travelled back to Sudan to visit his ailing mother. He was repeatedly imprisoned by Sudanese authorities. He tried to return to Canada several times but was denied a passport by Ottawa authorities, after he was placed on a United Nations no-fly list at the request of the United States.

Abdelrazik denies accusations that he is a terrorist. Both the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and the RCMP have publicly stated that they have no evidence of any involvement by Abdelrazik in terrorist activities.

He admits to knowing the so-called Millennium bomber, Ahmed Ressay of Montreal. Abdelrazik testified against Ressay at his trial.

In a June 4 ruling, a Federal Court judge ordered Abdelrazik's return, saying the federal government had breached his rights as a citizen to return to Canada.

"The power of the Canadian constitution and the rule of law obliged this government to allow Mr. Abdelrazik to come back," said his lawyer, Yavar Hameed. The law has triumphed over "reactionary politics and the egregious selective practice of citizenship," Hameed added.

Ishann Gardee, executive director for the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations, said that while Abdelrazik's return marks a significant victory, his troubles might not be over.

Because he remains on the UN's no-fly list, his assets and funds are frozen and anyone who assists him is liable to be charged.

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