

Exiled Canadian challenges minister to explain abrupt denial of passport

PAUL KORING

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Abousfian Abdelrazik, the Canadian barred from returning home because Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon has labelled him a national security threat, wants the minister to tell him what he has done wrong.

"I would ask him: 'Mr. Cannon, why do you have doubts about me when the security agencies don't?' " Mr. Abdelrazik said in a telephone interview yesterday from the Canadian embassy in Khartoum where he is marooned in exile.

Mr. Abdelrazik was denied a previously promised emergency passport less than two hours before he was to fly home last week. Mr. Cannon offered no evidence to back up a terse, one-sentence letter declaring Mr. Abdelrazik so grave a threat to Canada that he cannot return. Nor did he offer any explanation for the abrupt reversal of the government's threat assessment of Mr. Abdelrazik, who has been officially cleared by both CSIS and the RCMP.

Those threat assessments - less than 15 months ago - formed the basis of a request from the Harper government asking the UN Security Council to remove Mr. Abdelrazik from its terrorist blacklist. He had been labelled an al-Qaeda operative and added to the blacklist, without Canada's approval or consultation, by the Bush administration in 2006.

"How can you say I am a threat when the Canadian security agencies say I am not? ... On what grounds do you make your accusations?" Mr. Abdelrazik, 47, said yesterday, challenging the minister to explain.

Apparently, no evidence is needed. An obscure section of the Canadian Passport Order says "the Minister may refuse or revoke a passport if the Minister is of the opinion that such action is necessary for the national security of Canada or another country."

Nothing more than the minister's opinion is required and government officials have refused to disclose the basis for Mr. Cannon's.

"Pursuant to section 10.1 ... the minister has decided to refuse" Mr. Abdelrazik an emergency passport, a government lawyer said in a letter Friday, effectively nullifying the efforts of nearly 200 Canadians who had chipped in to buy him a ticket home.

Mr. Cannon's use of the section is apparently the first time it has been used to deny a Canadian citizen overseas the travel documents needed to exercise the right - guaranteed under Canadian and international law - to return home.

"The government is now in violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms," Liberal MP Irwin Cotler said.

For nearly a year - ever since the government granted Mr. Abdelrazik "temporary safe haven" in the Canadian embassy in Khartoum - it has repeatedly changed the requirements he must meet before it would give him an emergency travel document to replace the passport seized while he was imprisoned in Sudan.

At first the government said he needed only a confirmed flight reservation. When one was obtained last September, it refused to issue the travel document. Then, in December, it promised in writing an emergency passport if Mr. Abdelrazik had a fully paid ticket. When one was purchased in defiance of government regulations that make it illegal to provide help to anyone on a UN blacklist, Mr. Cannon said Mr. Abdelrazik must get himself off the list, despite the government's previously failed efforts to have him delisted. Washington apparently vetoed the government's delisting request.

"At some point this has to stop and the government has to do the right thing and bring him home," NDP MP Paul Dewar said.

Mr. Abdelrazik said his hopes of returning to his family in Montreal after six years of imprisonment and exile in Sudan were crushed Friday. But scores of letters and messages, read to him by his lawyers and faxed to the embassy, have buoyed his spirits.

"Those Canadians who sent me messages of support have touched me deep in my heart," he said. "I am so thankful for the letters, all of the support means so very, very, very much to me."