

Labour leaders defy UN sanctions and put Abdelrazik to work

By Tobi Cohen, Canwest News Service
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OTTAWA — Outraged that Canada isn't doing more to have Abousfian Abdelrazik removed from a UN security watch list that prevents employers from hiring him, labour unions have taken it upon themselves to give the Montreal machinist a job.

The Canadian Labour Congress has agreed to hire Abdelrazik for a week, while the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the International Association of Machinists will each hire him for a day.

As his bank account is frozen, Abdelrazik will be compensated in cash to travel the country talking about his case. Other unions affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress will be encouraged to prolong his symbolic employment in a gesture of solidarity.

Although it's technically illegal to hire him, union leaders say they're taking the risk as a means of pressuring the government to act.

"We recognize that the broader question of Mr. Abdelrazik (being able) to work and seek employment is a fundamental issue," Hassan Yussuff of the Canadian Labour Congress said Tuesday at a news conference.

"We all recognize the need to take steps to prevent terrorism . . . but at the same time, we have to prevent innocent people from being caught in that web where they can't get themselves out without the assistance and leadership of their government."

At issue is the fact that Abdelrazik's name is on the 1267 list established by the United Nation's Security Council in 1999 after the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kenya and expanded after the 9/11 terror attacks. Listed individuals are effectively banned from flying and bearing arms. Their assets are also frozen and anybody who assists them financially could be prosecuted.

The Sudanese-Canadian's ordeal began in 2003 when he travelled to Sudan to visit his sick mother and was arrested for allegedly having ties to al-Qaida.

He said he was tortured during two stints in custody and, while both Sudanese and Canadian authorities including the RCMP and CSIS cleared him of any wrongdoing, he found himself stuck in Sudan because of the no-fly order and the fact his passport had expired.

He spent 14 months living at the Canadian Embassy in Khartoum but Ottawa refused to issue him travel documents so he could return home because of the UN travel restriction.

He finally returned to Canada last June after a judge ordered the federal government to bring him back.

"Physically, I came to Canada, but I'm still in a prison — a prison without walls," Abdelrazik said Tuesday.

"I ask them just to act immediately to lobby on my behalf to de-list my name from that list and to bring the normal life to myself and to my family."

Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon said it's ultimately up to law enforcement officials to apply the law in Canada, but hinted the government likely wouldn't go after anybody who tried to help Abdelrazik.

"Recently there was a request that we supported to allow the Quebec government to pay an amount to support Mr. Abdelrazik and we did not object to that," he said.

Ottawa also didn't pursue charges against those Canadians who donated money for a plane ticket so Abdelrazik could return home from Sudan last year.

That said, the department maintains it's incumbent on Abdelrazik and his lawyers to get him off the list. The UN list, which is available on the Internet, shows he is still on it despite a review of his case as recently as May 6.

"All I can say is that in the past I tried to make sure that Mr. Abdelrazik had the support he needed to be removed from the UN list," Cannon said in reference to the government's 2007 request to have him de-listed.

"That attempt, unfortunately, failed."

Abdelrazik's supporters argue the federal government hasn't done enough to make its case and that it must step up its lobbying efforts.

"We have a Canadian being denied his fundamental freedoms," said Dave Ritchie of the International Association of Machinists.

"This man needs to be able to do what each one of us takes for granted on a regular basis: provide for his family, get a job, being able to have a bank account. Simple things, he can't do. "

"As a Canadian, it hurts me that our government is allowing this to occur."

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