

Maybe Ottawa only likes some of us

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In the end, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative government pulled out all the stops for Brenda Martin. Huzzah. Too bad they won't do it for other Canadians.

Martin is the 51-year-old who was arrested, tried and convicted in Mexico last month for Internet fraud. Just days after a Mexican judge sentenced her to five years in prison, Ottawa whisked her home to serve her time. Yesterday, it announced that she is eligible for accelerated parole review. She is expected to be freed soon.

Most Canadians will not begrudge Martin her good fortune. She'd been in a Mexican jail for two years awaiting trial. But the government's alacrity in her case is decidedly unusual.

Consider the story of Bashir Makhtal, a Canadian businessman who has been in an Ethiopian prison for more than a year. Caught in Somalia during the U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion of that country, he took Ottawa's advice and fled to Kenya. There, he was arrested and, in spite of his Canadian passport, deported to Ethiopia. He has not been charged with a crime. The only allegation against him seems to be that his grandfather helped found a separatist organization that Ethiopia (but not Canada) regards as terrorist.

Unlike Martin, Makhtal hasn't received visits from high-profile government MPs. The Ethiopians don't even allow him Canadian consular visits.

Junior foreign minister Helena Guergis argues that Ottawa can't intervene in cases before foreign courts. Tell that to the Mexicans. At one point during the Brenda Martin saga, Harper personally lobbied Mexican President Felipe Calderon.

Yet, Makhtal isn't unique. An equally disturbing story became public this week. This one involves a Canadian citizen named Abousfian Abdelrazik who for five years has been trapped in his native Sudan unable to get home. The reason? Apparently, Canada's spy service believes him to be a terrorist.

Indeed, unspecified agencies in Canada's previous Liberal government apparently asked Sudan to jail Abdelrazik five years ago when he went there to visit his ailing mother. (This, by the way, seems to have been part of a pattern. An unusually secretive royal commission is looking into allegations by three other Muslim Canadians that they too were victims of similar remote-control rendition schemes.)

The Sudanese obliged but, after the usual round of beatings, released Abdelrazik without charges. He's not wanted for any crime by any country. Yet, because Ottawa won't renew his passport (it expired when he was in prison), he can't leave Sudan. He can't get on a flight home

because he's on the notoriously inaccurate no-fly list.

Talk about catch-22. Until The Globe and Mail broke the story, no one in Ottawa was willing to go to bat for this Canadian. Now, the Harper government is at least letting him hole up in its Khartoum embassy. Maybe Ottawa will eventually be embarrassed into helping him get home.

Finally, Omar Khadr. There's no danger of Ottawa feeling embarrassed here. The Harper government positively delights in the fact that this Canadian, arrested six years ago when he was just 15 and jailed since then at Guantanamo Bay, is set to go on trial for war crimes.

The evidence against Khadr is dodgy and the tribunal he is to appear before demonstrably unfair. Yet, from Ottawa, there is nothing. No high-profile visits. No pleas from Harper.

But then, like Makhtal and Abdelrazik, Omar Khadr is no Brenda Martin.

For one thing, no reasonable court has ever found him guilty of a crime.

Thomas Walkom's column appears Wednesday and Saturday.