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Abousfian Abdelrazik lives in a prison without walls

By Gerald Caplan

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Ten months after he was finally allowed home, the Harper government's indifference to the Montrealer's plight demands attention

For Montrealer Abousfian Abdelrazik, the nightmare continues. Maybe readers will have forgotten his name already. I've written about his ordeal several times and a small dedicated group of his fellow Canadians, coming together as Project Fly Home, continues to advocate for him. But it doesn't take long in our culture of factoid overload, 24/7 news and 15-second celebrities for someone to disappear from our consciousness. Out of sight, out of mind.

Over the past seven years, Mr. Abdelrazik's life has been ruined by his own government, first under the Liberals then the Conservatives. For most of that time, he was trapped in Sudan, his birth place, where he was imprisoned and tortured as a possible terrorist at the behest of our own CSIS. Eventually all Canadian security authorities acknowledged there was no case against him, but Orwellian regulations made it impossible for him to fly back home to Canada, so, being a Canadian citizen, he camped out for more than a year at our embassy in Khartoum, Sudan's capital.

Finally, despite threats that they'd be committing an illegal act, Canadians from across the country (including me, I gladly disclose) united to buy him a ticket home last June. But almost 10 months later, he's still trapped, now by the Harper government colluding with a notorious United Nations Security Council anti-terrorist blacklist. Known as the 1267 regime, it prevents anyone on it from earning a salary, receiving any money or maintaining a bank account. Listed individuals face vague allegations, have no right to a hearing before they're placed on the list and are provided no evidence to support the claims against them.

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Mr. Abdelrazik, for example, was labeled an al-Qaeda operative by the Bush administration, even though he's been cleared in writing by both the RCMP and CSIS of any terrorist links. No wonder 1267 is seen as the quintessential Kafkaesque institution that shames the United Nations and its myriad of human-rights protocols. As Mr. Justice Russell Zinn of Federal Court wrote in his June, 2009, decision on Mr. Abdelrazik's case: "I add my name to those who view the 1267 committee as a denial of basic legal remedies and as untenable under the principles of international human rights." Judge Zinn ruled that the Harper government had violated Mr. Abdelrazik's constitutional rights by keeping him out of Canada for so many years and ordered them to bring Mr. Abdelrazik home

Yet after all those years of exile, imprisonment and torture, and without a shred of evidence to tie him to any illicit activity, he comes home to Montreal to a prison without walls. Our government, directly responsible for so much of Mr. Abdelrazik's ordeal, can free him from it and fellow Canadians need to pressure it to do so. Project Fly Home, with the endorsement of numerous civil society organizations, is escalating its ongoing campaign to force Stephen Harper to allow Mr. Abdelrazik to resume a normal life.



Abusoufian Abdelrazik embraces his 6-year-old son, Kouteyba, at his Montreal home on Sept. 22, 2009.

They want an acknowledgement by Ottawa that the government is responsible for Mr. Abdelrazik's plight, with an apology and some kind of monetary settlement. Yet the Harper government refuses all of these perfectly just demands. Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon - whose presence on the international stage repeatedly embarrasses this country - has labeled Mr. Abdelrazik a threat to national security though he offers no evidence since there is none. Remarkably too, Mr. Cannon also told Mr. Abdelrazik that it was his own responsibility to get himself de-listed from 1267 although he's never been told why he's on it and no individual has ever successfully gotten himself removed from the list.

Since it was the Americans who insisted that Mr. Abdelrazik be put on the 1267 blacklist, they have to be persuaded that he must be de-listed. That's a job for our government and we need to lobby them hard to do so. Ottawa actually did support a delisting application about two years ago after Mr. Abdelrazik was cleared by Canadian intelligence agencies, but the Bush administration blocked the move. Our government has not stirred itself since. I'll restrain myself from the usual intemperate adjectives to describe the government's indifference.

In fact, however, we don't need the United States. It's within the direct power of the government of Canada itself to lift the sanctions against Mr. Abdelrazik. It did exactly that in 2002 in the case of Liban Hussein, then the only Canadian on the 1267 blacklist. In terms of simple justice and as a statement of responsibility by the Harper government, how can anything less be done? And yet since Mr. Abdelrazik's return home last June, they have failed to do so.

I hope many Canadians, and especially supporters of the present government confounded by its perverse behaviour towards Mr. Abdelrazik, will want to participate in the campaign to free him from his seven-year ordeal. So I hope they'll check in with Project Fly Home [<http://www.peoplescommission.org/en/abdelrazik/>]] and support its various initiatives this month, including what they charmingly call a "sanctions-busting telethon and spaghetti dinner" on April 28. Since he's forbidden from working, some may even want to contribute money to Mr. Abdelrazik so he can survive. Such generosity of course risks federal prosecution. The long list of contributors to date is public and we all invite our government to prosecute us if they dare.

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