

It is time for Bashir Makhtal to return to Canada – Open Letter

Written by Administrator
Friday, 11 June 2010 21:56 -

In an Open Letter to the Prime Minister, Alex Neve of Amnesty Canada and Ihsaan Gardee of Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations call on the Canadian government to make Canadian citizen Bashir Makhtal's immediate return home possible.

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A2

By fax: 613-941-6900

June 11, 2010

Dear Prime Minister,

We have written to you previously, and to other members of your government, about the troubling case of Bashir Makhtal. Mr. Makhtal, a Canadian citizen of Ogadeni origin, has been imprisoned in Ethiopia for close to 3 ½ years now where he has experienced a range of very serious human rights violations.

We are writing at this time in light of the invitation you personally have extended to Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to attend this month's G20 Summit in Toronto. We urge that you make it clear to Prime Minister Zenawi that you expect Mr. Makhtal to be released and be able to return to Canada by the time Prime Minister Zenawi travels here. In effect, you should stress that the invitation to come to Canada is an invitation for two: the Prime Minister and Mr. Makhtal.

Mr. Makhtal has been sentenced to a life prison term after a fundamentally unfair trial. He stands accused of providing support to an Ogadeni opposition group in Ethiopia. However, given the profoundly unfair nature of the legal proceedings, the basis for those accusations has never been made clear and no credible evidence in support of the charges has ever been made public. Instead, much of the basis of the case has seemed to stem from the mere fact that Mr. Makhtal's grandfather was once an Ogadeni leader. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Ethiopian authorities to bring Mr. Makhtal to trial in proceedings that meet internationally-recognized fair trial standards or to release him immediately and unconditionally. Given that there appears to be no prospect of a fair trial, he should be released.

We have appreciated the strong stand that your government has taken on this case. Several ministers, including Ministers Baird and Minister Cannon, as well as Parliamentary Secretary Deepak Obhrai, have raised the case in meetings with Canadian officials in Canada and in Ethiopia. Canada's position has, as we understand it, been firm – that Mr. Makhtal should be allowed to return to Canada.

We also appreciate that the Canadian government has made some effort to assist other members of Mr. Makhtal's family in Ethiopia and the region, all of whom have borne the

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consequences of the Ethiopian government's actions. In particular, we welcome the fact that the government facilitated the resettlement of Mr. Makhtal's wife, Asisa Osman Abdi, to Canada earlier this year.

Other relatives of Mr. Makhtal remain in very difficult conditions. Mr. Makhtal's sister, Rukiya, and several members of her family have had to flee to a UN refugee camp in Kenya, as she herself was imprisoned for several months and badly mistreated at the time of Mr. Makhtal's arrest. With Amnesty International's help, they are in the process of seeking UNHCR approval to resettle as refugees in Canada. Your government's efforts to support and expedite their resettlement would be greatly appreciated.

Mr. Makhtal's older brother, Hassan Ahmed, was also imprisoned and sentenced to a 15 year prison term around the time of Mr. Makhtal's arrest. He was released in March 2009 after 22 months imprisonment, because he was in extremely poor health. Tragically he died In November 2009. It has not yet been possible to clarify and confirm whether his death was related to his treatment in prison or the conditions of detention. We call on the Canadian government to press Ethiopian authorities to ensure that there is an independent investigation of the circumstances that led to Hassan Ahmed's death.

We understand that following Minister Baird's February 2010 visit to Ethiopia there has been consideration of negotiating a prisoner transfer agreement to facilitate Mr. Makhtal's return to Canada. But such an arrangement would mean that he would be required to serve a life prison term in Canada, which is clearly unacceptable in the circumstances of his case.

Efforts on Mr. Makhtal's case appear to have reached an impasse Prime Minister. We strongly urge, therefore, that now is the time for you to become personally involved and to do so in the context of the invitation you have extended to Prime Minister Zenawi. Members of your government have made it clear to the Ethiopian government that Mr. Makhtal should be released and allowed to return to Canada. Now is time for you, personally, to make it clear, directly to Prime Minister Zenawi -- Bashir's Makhtal return must happen now.

Sincerely,

Ihsaan Gardee
Executive Director
Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations

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