

Canadian jailed four years in Ethiopia fears for his life

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 20 January 2011 14:56 - Last Updated Thursday, 20 January 2011 15:10



DAVID McDOUGALL

From Thursday's Globe and Mail

“To Whom It May Concern:

“I am in Ethiopian prison for all most 4long years, with out any communication to the outside world.

“I do not know whether I will be able to get this message out to the world of freedom,” reads the handwritten undated letter, with misspelled words angled neatly across a single page and titled simply, “The Jailed Bashir Makhtal.”

The letter, penned by the 42-year-old Ethiopian-born Canadian and smuggled out of Kaliti Prison in Addis Ababa some time last month, is the latest and most revealing communication from Mr. Makhtal since his ordeal began.

For the past four years, Mr. Makhtal, a former Toronto-area IT specialist, has languished in Ethiopian jails. Convicted of terrorism-related charges, he was sentenced in 2009 to life in prison.

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The government of Canada and his family and friends say he is innocent, and have pressed for his release or return to Canada.

According to the letter, Mr. Makhtal, who has seen little hope for release since his sentence was handed down, now fears he may be killed. “Though I was wrongfully convicted and sentenced to life ... now Ethiopians are about to take their next step – to get red of me,” he writes, suggesting they want him to attempt to escape as a pretext to shoot him.

Kenyan authorities looking for Islamist fighters with ties to al-Qaeda arrested Mr. Makhtal in December of 2006 as he fled fighting in Somalia.

On Jan. 20, 2007 – exactly four years ago – he was put onto one of several secret flights out of Kenya along with dozens of prisoners, including British, American and Kenyan nationals, and sent to Ethiopia in violation of Kenyan and international law.

After pressure from the Canadian government to bring his case to justice, he was swiftly tried and convicted by a civilian court in 2009, following a legal process condemned by human-rights groups as unfair.

His supporters believe the reason is that his grandfather was a senior member of the Ogaden National Liberation Front, an ethnic Somali separatist movement that the Ethiopian government considers a terrorist organization – though Canada does not.

“I don’t see any evidence whatsoever that points to his guilt,” said Conservative cabinet minister John Baird, who last February travelled to Ethiopia on behalf of the Canadian government to press for Mr. Makhtal’s release or return to Canada. “I believe we will meet with success on this, but it’s obviously not going to come easy.”

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Others worry the Canadian government has forgotten the case.

“We’re very frustrated that four years have gone by since his rendition and he’s still in jail,” said human-rights lawyer Lorne Waldman, who is representing Mr. Makhtal’s case in Canada and plans to speak at a press conference Thursday in Ottawa marking the anniversary of his imprisonment in Ethiopia.

“There doesn’t seem to have been any activity on the official front since March when John Baird went.”

Mr. Makhtal’s letter expresses the same frustration: “I know why Ethiopians are serious about my case,” he writes, “[but I was] struggling to find out why my country Canada is so reluctant to save me from such unjust and inhuman treatment.”

□ **The Globe and Mail**