

Wife despairs for man in Ethiopia jail

Written by Administrator

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Debra Black Staff Reporter

It is the same every morning. Asiso Osman Abdi wakes at around 3 a.m., worried about her future and the plight of her husband



band Bashir Makhtal.

She goes into the comfy kitchen in the home of her cousin-in-law Said Maktal and makes tea and drinks it.

Her beautiful dark brown eyes are ringed with circles, recounts Maktal, who finds her in his kitchen every morning when he wakes to say prayers.

The peace of sleep eludes her, she tells him in Somali, because she is fearful she may never

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see her husband again.

“To me, I feel like the Canadian government doesn’t care about my husband and his passport,” she says through a translator during an interview with the Star.

Makhtal, a Canadian citizen, is serving a life sentence in a prison in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, after being charged with multiple counts of terrorism for allegedly being a ringleader with the Ogaden National Liberation Front, an ethnic Somali group formed to fight for independence in the oil-rich region.

The Ethiopians have outlawed the group, calling it a terrorist organization.

Family and supporters here have always denied these allegations, saying the only connection Bashir Makhtal, 42, has to the ONLF is that his grandfather was one of the co-founders.

Abdi describes her husband as “a very good man — who did good for the people, the community, anyone he knows.” Then she adds: “He is very humble.”

As for her future without him, she is hesitant and unsure of what lies ahead. “My future looks bad. My husband is in prison for four years,” says Abdi. “He’s suffering all kind of medical problems, including back pain and bronchitis.”

Haltingly in some newly acquired English, she says: “Canada is good, the government is bad.”

The 24-year-old came to Canada in March 2010. She was terrified that she would be snatched from Nairobi by the Ethiopians. Said Maktal persuaded Ottawa to allow her to come on a

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two-year visa.

As grateful as she is to be here, she is angry with the Canadian government, fearful it has abandoned Makhtal, whom she married nine months before he was arrested.

And Makhtal's cousin Said Maktal, his family members and other supporters are also fed up with what they describe as "a lot of empty promises" from Ottawa as he begins his fifth year of imprisonment.

"Why can't someone tell me the truth?" Said Maktal asks. "Whether or not they're going to bring (Makhtal) back to Canada or not help him period? It's a fair question."

Makhtal, a former Toronto businessman, had returned to Africa in 2002 to run a used clothing business out of Djibouti, a tiny country between Ethiopia and Somalia on the Horn of Africa.

He has been in prison since Dec. 30, 2006, when he was stopped at the Somalia-Kenya border.

He was returning to Nairobi, Kenya, after fleeing Mogadishu and the fall of the Islamic Courts Union, a religious alliance that seized control of Somalia before it was ousted by U.S. and Ethiopian forces in 2006.

At the Kenyan border, his Canadian passport ignored, Makhtal was arrested and shipped to Nairobi, where he was imprisoned and eventually rendered in shackles to Ethiopia on Jan. 20, 2007, on a top-secret flight.

At first Canadian diplomats couldn't even locate Makhtal after his arrest. Ethiopia denied he was there. Then Ethiopian officials refused access to him for the first 18 months of his imprisonment.

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He was convicted of terrorism in the summer of 2009 on a number of counts, including being a member of a separatist group, engaging in an armed struggle against the government, and aiding and abetting the Islamic Courts Union.

While all of those who were arrested with him and sent to Ethiopia on that top-secret flight have been freed, Makhtal remains in jail, suffering from significant weight loss along with bronchitis.

The involvement and surprise visit to Makhtal's Ethiopian cell at Kaiti Prison in February 2010 by Conservative minister John Baird seemed to bode well for Makhtal.

Baird, who has said he and the Canadian government believe in Makhtal's innocence, said he had made a formal request in a meeting with Ethiopia's foreign minister for Makhtal to be deported or expelled.

But now nine months later, there is no indication of a prison transfer, pardon or a deportation. And in a twist, one of the witnesses at his trial who alleged Makhtal was involved with the ONLF is now in jail himself, facing murder charges.

Said Maktal believes the Conservatives lost a golden opportunity to lobby the Ethiopians for the release of his cousin during the G20 and G8 meetings in June in Toronto, where Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was in attendance.

Both Maktal and Canadian human rights lawyer Lorne Waldman believe Makhtal's incarceration is part of a larger political game. "My cousin was used as a bargaining chip," said Said Maktal, pointing to the fact Ethiopia has long wanted landing rights for its airline in Canada and was recently granted the rights to fly into Toronto as well as a boost in aid.

Adds Waldman: "The Ethiopian interest in Bashir is a way of striking back at the Somalian opposition in Ethiopia. But also once it became apparent that Canada was concerned about Bashir's case, Ethiopia continued to use Bashir to get concessions out of Canada. It seems Canada has been outfoxed by Ethiopia."

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Efforts to get Makhtal released are once more revving up, with a Jan. 20 news conference being held to mark the anniversary of his rendition to Ethiopia. New Democrat MP Paul Dewar has written Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon asking him to demand the “immediate release” of Makhtal. The government said in a statement the case remains a priority.

A call to the Ethiopian embassy in Ottawa was not returned.