

SAUDI ARABIA: Canada flaunts diplomatic strain with the Saudis and cuts in front of Australia by flying Al-Qunun to freedom

Bangkok – Toronto: Canada's swift action to snap up asylum-seeker Rahaf Al-Qunun and to fly her true north as Australia contemplates is sure to annoy Saudis – Social media and high visibility played a significant role but other asylum-seekers have not been so lucky.

By Keri Gibbs

British Pakistani Christian Association (12.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2ssxLid> – In a bold move Canada has flown Saudi asylum seeker Rafal Al-Qunun out of her week-long purgatory in Thailand to the freedom of Ontario's crisp January air.

Canada has been very vocal in their criticism of Saudi Arabia's human rights record – even before the brazen murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Turkey last fall which shocked the world.

The Canadian government has granted asylum to the families of other vocal proponents of free speech in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia such as Ensaf Haider the wife of Raif Bawadi who has

suffered lashes and imprisonment in Saudi Arabia for “insulting Islam on electronic channels” of the situation with Al-Qunun was swift to advocate for Al-Qunun, she tweeted:

“Any human being should act:

PLEASE HELP @rahaf84427714, she is a Saudi girl who tried to run from Saudi, but the Saudi embassy caught her in Thailand they arrested her!”

Keri-Lynn Gibbs BPCA Canada representative said:

“Canada has had an adversarial relationship with the Saudis ever since encountering retaliation for deriding their human rights record, and taking in dissidents that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would rather be silenced.

“Saudi Arabia had a significant number of university students studying in Canada, including many of who were completing residencies at medical institutions.

“In response to Canada’s criticism they pulled out their students and sent them to other countries such as the UK who are on friendlier terms with them.

She further postulated:

“In the current diplomatic environment it is not surprising that Canada was eager to cut in front of Australia’s offer of asylum to literally sweep Ms Al-Qunun off her feet and fly her to safety far away from Saudi Arabia.”

Saudi Arabia has even expelled the Canadian Ambassador and cut off diplomatic ties because of their irritation at Canada’s incessant virtue signalling as when Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland chimed in on the Badawi’s situation. Ms Freeland said:

“Very alarmed to learn that Samar Badawi, Raif Badawi’s sister, has been imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. Canada stands together with the Badawi family in this difficult time, and we continue to strongly call for the release of both Raif and Samar Badawi.”

Western Canada also has a campaign against Saudi and other Gulf States’ oil – countries whose human rights abuses coupled by a crisis in the Canadian oil and gas industry have driven the hashtag Campaign #StopSaudiOil

Another remarkable point in this case is the high visibility of Rafal Al-Qunun’s escape – as soon as she fell into trouble she posted to social media and declared her un-retractable reasons for asylum.

Declaring her atheism she cut herself off from her homeland forever and fully committed herself to being an apostate from Islam.

In his Twitter feed, Pak-Canadian journalist Tarek Fatah, a Muslim who is also a vocal critic of Islamic extremism, said:

“Had there been no Twitter, it can safely be assumed, Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun, an 18-year old Saudi woman who fled her family, country and religion could have been dead.”

His daughter Natasha Fatah, also a journalist, fully engaged with her father and other activists such as Yasmine Mohammed and described their viral Tweetfest, tweeting:

“...al-Qunun’s story gained momentum on Twitter thanks to a handful of activists.”

Later Ms Fatah sent out a congratulatory message:

“You are welcome Rahaf! All of Canada is waiting your arrival. Many ready to welcome you and help you integrate into your new home...and if I may say, a wonderful, welcoming, progressive country!”

Keri-Lynn Gibbs from BPCA (Canada) continued:

“In my discussions with Canadian private sponsors and with our BPCA Bangkok officer, I have noticed that many people – especially in the Pak-Christian asylum community – have

difficulty opening up about their need and even telling their story because their trauma is too deep.

“They are so used to keeping a low profile that the world would not even know about them unless journalists like Chris Rogers, and Mitch Potter; activists like Wilson Chowdhry, and Peter Bhatti; and exemplar politicians like Lord Alton (UK), MP Garnett Genuis (Canada), and Senator Peter Abetz (Australia) kept their plight in their respective government’s line of sight.

She further said:

“We need to speak up and break the silence on human rights violations in countries like Saudia Arabia and Pakistan, and make a serious effort to end the refugee crisis happening in transit countries like Thailand.

“This means refugees who come to western democracies must forgo their trauma-based shyness and share their real-life experiences.”

Online magazine, Newsvire reported the expeditious asylum given to Al-Qunun as compared to the 45 day detention so far of already accepted Australian refugee Hakeem Al-Araibi from Bahrain who is still being held in Thailand. They even described incidents regarding those who flee to other countries such as the Phillipines who have returned Saudi asylum seekers after attempting the exact same manoeuvre as this young woman never to be heard from again. This reminds us

all of the alarming miscarriages in the asylum process that have destroyed prominent and less known victims.

In addition they pointed out that a Saudi official' lamented to Thai officials about the quickly gathered 45,000 followers tracking Qunun's whereabouts and well-being saying in Arabic:

"I wish you had taken her phone, it would have been better than [taking] her passport."

A comment which speaks volumes of the Machiavellian nature of the Saudi government.

Perhaps even more disgracefully the Royal Thai Authorities are trying to make themselves the heroes in this recent decision. In the Newswire article, head of Thai immigration, General Surachate Hakparn said:

"She is now under the sovereignty of Thailand,"

"No one and no embassy can force her to go anywhere.

"Thailand is a land of smiles. We will not send anyone to die."

Yet in 2014 after being forced back to Pakistan after being

brutally incarcerated in the Bangkok IDC two returning Pakistani Christian men were arrested for blasphemy and in December 2018 convicted and sentenced to death. Neither these brothers nor the thousands of other Pakistani Christian asylum seekers in Thailand feel the nation is a 'land of smiles'. You can learn more about the Pakistani Christians in Thailand.

Qunun aptly posted on social media with videos communicated the urgency of her situation, and a kind journalist: Egyptian-American Mona Eltahawy translated and shared her posts.

Hopefully that will not mean the gig is up for others using social media in their play for freedom.

Wilson Chowdhry said:

"The media plays an important role in registering a need for help and must accurately sound the alarm regardless of their personal comfort.

"When authoritarian states are allowed to sweep human rights abuses under the carpet then other countries will form their foreign policy in the absence of that vital information.

"We often need to be bolder than we are at raising our voices for the disenfranchised.

“Earlier this week BPCA posted the testimony of one of our new Australian volunteers, Lara Hall, who was victimised by a Pakistani man and his family, boldly told her story. It is important to cry out at the harm done to our innocence by violations against our humanity, to tell the truth and to seek help.

“In Great Britain there are some churches and charities that do not appreciate that we at BPCA talk about the targeted sexual assaults or forced marriages that are happening to Pakistani Christian woman. Others are offended when we identify that a murder, rape or otherwise hate-crime was committed by a Muslim.

“It is necessary to bring these atrocities to light in order to extrapolate those who are suffering and to effectively deal with the societal problems that arise because of them.”

BPCA is extremely pleased at the outcome for Rahaf Al-Qunun and wishes her well in her new life. To hear our BPCA (Canada) representative comment on this turn of event watch the [video](#).

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