

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. Nether these brothers nor the thousands of other Pakistani Christian asylum seekers in Thailand feel the nations 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 right 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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FRANCE: A Canadian-Indian citizen wrongly detained for 2 months under suspicion of being a guru

In September, Jean-Luc Martin-Lagardette published an article about Neelam Makhija, 71, a retired Indo-Canadian engineer, who spent two months in prison and was held against his will in France for two and a half years under suspicion for being a 'guru'. HRWF has summarized this article, the full French version of it can be found here.

CAP/Liberté de Conscience (09.10.2018) – Neelam Makhija, 71, is a Canadian citizen of Indian origin. As an engineer in third cycle electronics (MSEE) and holder of a master of business administration (MBA), he founded and directed for 23 years a company specialized in high-tech electronic projects in Canada. He retired in 2006, and has since spent his time between Toronto and Mumbai where his two daughters and grandchildren live.

Between 2010 and 2014, he made several visits to France to see his Canadian friend Cécile Tousignant, whom he has known since 2007. She is a life coach and meditation teacher inspired by an Indian master (in France and Quebec). She invited him to participate in three of her meditation courses lasting 2, 4 and 7 days respectively.

Gendarmerie raid

On November 24, 2014, Mr. Makhija was in Fontainebleau with a small group of 6-7 people, when a squad of gendarmerie arrived at 7 am at the private house where Cécile Tousignant was leading a meditation session. They arrested Ms. Tousignant and Mr. Makhija together with two other participants. They intervened following a notification to the Center against Mental Manipulation (CCMM) by the father of one of her former students.

The gendarmes, about twenty, were all armed and behaved as if they had come to save the participants from a serious and imminent danger.

Ms. Tousignant and Mr. Makhija were separated for one year without the right to any contact between each other.

After a few hours of interrogation without the presence of a lawyer, the designated translator explained briefly the accusations to Mr. Makhija. They claimed that he had allegedly «used fraudulent means to manipulate people's minds in a state of psychological subjection and to scam them. He had allegedly used mental techniques and created a mysterious Indian atmosphere to influence these people who were in a situation

of weakness.» And he allegedly belonged to «the cult» of the guru (Indian spiritual master) Osho.

The defendants were kept in jail separately for eight weeks «because we were foreigners and the investigating judge was too busy to meet us,» says Neelam Makhija. «The gendarmes who arrested us told the prison authorities that we were part of the cult of Osho, the sex guru.» «Then the judge met me: she wanted to know everything about me, my life, Osho, the Indian gurus and the Indian spirituality. For me, it was a shock because I was just a visitor! I did not have a client or work here. I do not even speak the French language. They said they had pages of criminal charges against me. But I was just a tourist for three weeks in France, with a return ticket to Bombay. I did not understand why they were criticizing my culture!»

Makhija was expected to return to his family in India within ten days. During his detention, he asked his assigned lawyer to contact his family, but his request was turned down. Once in prison, he had to wait for over two weeks before he could call his daughter: «My children and grandchildren were very worried about what could have happened to their 70-year old father. As I could not communicate with them, they thought I was sick or ...dead».

After spending nearly two months in prison, without due process before a court, where he could have defended himself, and after paying a deposit of 50,000 euros, Mr. Makhija was released but forbidden to leave the territory of France for two and a half years.

During this period, the investigating judge met him only once, on January 15, 2015. On January 26, he was out of prison. In March, the investigating judge questioned all the clients of Ms. Cécile Tousignant. They all declared that they had no problems with Neelam Makhija, and most of them said that they did not know him and did not give him any money.

Neelam's lawyer repeatedly but vainly tried to have the limits to his freedom of movement lifted.

The prosecutor abandons the charges

The trial finally took place on June 2, 2017, after a long process lasting 30 months. The prosecutor said he would abandon the charge of mentally manipulating people in a state of weakness due to the lack of evidence to support such an accusation. He recognized that the investigation judge had acted too zealously and that she used an inordinate amount of time to process the investigation. He also abandoned the money laundering charges due to the lack of evidence to support that Mr. Makhija received funds from Mrs. Tousignant.

The judges were eager to shorten this embarrassing affair. After the deliberation of less than one hour, they "whitewashed" the accused, and just sentenced him to a symbolic fine for giving advice to Cécile Tousignant regarding the the tax administration.

Neelam Makhija lost over € 600,000

According to Mr. Makhija, the amount of the financial damage due to this abusive prosecution exceeded € 600 000, but there were non-financial consequences as well, such as loss of reputation among his relatives, his community and his business partners.

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