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April 6, 2003

Abandoned by Canada, Sampson awaits his fate

By PETER WORTHINGTON -- Toronto Sun



In a letter to the National Post, Dr. Mohammed al-Hussaini, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Canada, defended his country's imprisonment of Canadian Bill Sampson, who has been sentenced to death after a secret trial.

It's an odd case. No one is sure of what's going on, except that 45-year-old Sampson, who worked for the Saudi Industrial Development fund, has been in solitary confinement for over 800 days. He was sentenced to death for allegedly being involved in a car-bomb explosion that killed a Briton - supposedly a turf war over illicit booze.

Sampson has had two heart operations while imprisoned. Sound screwy? You bet, but not as screwy as the ambassador's letter which defended the "divine Sharia law" (Islamic law) under which Sampson was convicted, and which doesn't mollycoddle the guilty.

Steal something and you're liable to have your hand chopped off; commit adultery and you may be stoned to death; young girls trying to escape a school fire without a head covering may be required by the religious police to burn to death for modesty's sake.

In his letter, Ambassador al-Hussaini insisted Sampson "has nothing to fear if he is innocent." But he and six others (five Britons and a Belgian) have already been found guilty at a trial at which they were neither present nor represented. The "conviction" is now wending its way through an appeal system that includes the High Sharia Court, the High Court of Appeal, the Supreme Judicial Council and, finally, the Royal Court.

None of which, apparently, involves lawyers, or such niceties as a jury. All the "guilty" men have confessed on TV, and all have rescinded their confessions.

Dr. al-Hussaini insists Sampson has not been tortured because "torture in any form is against the Sharia law." Yet when an independent British doctor examined Sampson, he found chipped vertebra, "severe bruises" on his legs and torso, "trauma" to his feet and various scratches and abrasions. Saudis say his injuries are from suicide attempts.

Of course we can't know for sure what Sampson and the other guys found guilty with him were up to, if anything. They claim they are being scapegoated for anti-royal family incidents committed by Saudi dissidents.

It's easier to blame foreigners than admit there's a potential revolution brewing in Saudi Arabia, led by religious militants and such. Again, we don't know.

Sampson's father Jim, 72, a retired Air Canada pilot, has been to Saudi Arabia to visit his son who, increasingly, refuses to see his father or any Canadian embassy diplomats.

Jim Sampson told the Globe and Mail he found it reassuring that the last time he tried to visit his son in prison, Bill hurled ash trays at him and refused to talk. To the father, it showed his son's spirit hadn't been broken and he was fighting back in his own way. Dad was proud of him.

Still, Bill Sampson defying his captors by shouting abuse at the Prophet Mohammed and cursing the system, may not be the best way to curry favour.



Nor is dad's penchant for calling the Saudis "savages" and "monkeys" likely to win him friends in Riyadh or in the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Frustration and indignation are understandable.

When he was foreign minister, John Manley said he was "very concerned" about Sampson's case. And that seemed to be the end of it.

After 800-plus days in solitary, with all the evidence accumulated in the interim, a case can be made that it's not the Saudis with whom one should be outraged, but the Canadian government.

We know what the Saudis do - the royal family's double standard of Islamic purity at home and living on the wild side when visiting the decadent West is well known.

Why won't the Canadian government put its body on the line for a citizen in trouble who is obviously being treated in a way we find unacceptable? Every human rights organization around the world condemns the Saudis over Sampson.

But not the Canadian government.

Surely it's time for Ottawa to insist this case be settled. If nothing positive is done, Canada should recall its ambassador and send Dr. al-Hussaini back to Saudi Arabia "for consultations." Progressively, trade and cultural relations with Saudi Arabia should be suspended.

This may seem extreme behaviour for one individual, but a country that will not stand up for a citizen who's being treated abominably by a regime with whom we enjoy supposedly friendly relations is a cowardly and unworthy country.

By abandoning Sampson, even if he now refuses to meet with our consular officials, the government demeans Canada and Canadians. Our reputation for helping citizens in trouble isn't much to be proud of at the best of times. With Sampson, it's disgusting.

Letters to the editor should be sent to editor@sunpub.com.

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