

BITTER ANNIVERSARY FOR RENDITION VICTIM

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By Benamar Benatta, [The Toronto Star](#), 20 July 2009

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Today marks a bitter anniversary: three years in my struggle to get answers as to how and why the Government of Canada could have done this to me, in violation of domestic and international law. On Sept. 5, 2001, I came to Canada seeking political asylum. I was fleeing my home country of Algeria, where I was scared that I would be killed if I stayed.

After spending seven days and nights in Canadian custody awaiting my refugee hearing, on the evening of Sept. 12, without telling me where I was going, giving me access to a lawyer or following laws of any kind, Canadian officials drove me over the border and handed me to the Americans.

You see, Canada thought I had something to do with the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks because I was a Muslim man, I was in the Algerian military and had studied aeronautics as a university student.

But they were wrong about me. I was innocent. I was even cleared by the FBI. I spent nearly five years in prison in the United States, where I was tortured and abused (according to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which produced a report about me).

Finally, I was released from prison and allowed to return to Canada to finish the refugee claim that I had started so many years before. That bitter anniversary of my "return" to Canada was three years ago today: July 20, 2006.

You would think that July 20 would be a happy anniversary for me, seeing as it was the day that I was released from prison. Well, sorry to disappoint you, but this anniversary is agony. On the day I was released, I had nothing – no money, no belongings and no family or friends to turn to.

When I arrived in Canada by prison escort, after being interviewed for hours by Canadian officials, I was allowed to leave with a U.S. lawyer who had come to help me. We headed to the local Wal-Mart, me still in my prison uniform, to find some new clothes. I will never forget the frightened little girl who ran from me, or the cashier who eyed me like I was a criminal. It is these little indignities that stick with me.

So again, it is July 20. Three years have passed since that day and I still do not have any credible answers about why Canada handed me to the Americans. In fact, hurtfully, the Canadian government denies doing anything wrong in my case. But the government caused my nightmare.

Imagine being accused of the worst terrorist attack you can imagine, even though you are innocent. Imagine the injustice of facing torture (beatings, humiliation, sleep deprivation) and being imprisoned from the age of 27 to 32.

I have no redress for the ruination of my career, for post-traumatic stress and depression, for reliving the nightmares of my detention every time I close my eyes. In fact, I still do not even have an "I'm sorry" from the government. "I'm sorry" for throwing all the laws of the land out the window. "I'm sorry" we ruined your life.

Why hasn't the government done the right thing in my case? Why aren't Canadian citizens putting pressure on the government to do the right thing?

Maybe the government is more concerned about protecting its image than repairing the damage. Maybe, after the horrifying case of Maher Arar, Canadians can't accept that their government could be directly responsible for an extraordinary rendition (something reserved for more sinister nations, like the U.S. and Syria).

But it is true. It happened. And if Canada wants to continue forward as a nation that upholds the rule of law, and if Canadians want a government that promotes human rights, there must be acknowledgement of what happened.

There must be redress. And least of all, even three long years since my return to Canada, there must be an "I'm sorry."

