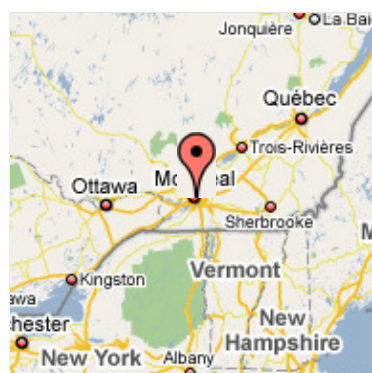


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Canada urged to take in Algerian man stuck in legal limbo at Guantanamo Bay

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MONTREAL — Montreal supporters of an Algerian national who has been detained at Guantanamo Bay for nearly seven years without being charged are calling on Canada to take him in.

Djamel Ameziane, 41, one of the longest-serving inmates at the infamous prison in Cuba, lived in Montreal for five years until about 2000 when he was denied refugee status here.

The Anglican Diocese of Montreal, Amnesty International and various human-rights groups held a news conference in Montreal on Wednesday to highlight Ameziane's case.

His lawyers say it was through sheer bad luck that Ameziane ended up in Afghanistan in 2000, the only country that would accept him without a visa or other paperwork.

Ameziane had hoped to settle in Afghanistan and perhaps start a business. But when military action began in 2001, Ameziane was rounded up by bounty hunters and sold to the United States military as he tried to flee the war-torn country, his lawyers say.

He was subsequently transported to Guantanamo Bay in February 2002, where he has been held for more than 2,300 days.

Ameziane's lawyers say he has been classified as an "enemy combatant" and been detained as a risk to national security.

But they add he is not accused of receiving military or terrorist training, did not take part in any fighting and there is no evidence he was involved in planning or financing terror attacks.

"He has never been charged nor has he ever had the chance to challenge the legality of his detention," said lawyer Pardiss Kebriaei of the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights.

Ameziane fears being returned to Algeria because of a risk of human-rights violations, based on the stigma of having been suspected of terrorism-related activities and detained in Guantanamo.

"He's suffered for too long and already lost too much," said Kebriaei.

Ameziane, who fled Algeria nearly 16 years ago, never imagined he would end up in one of the world's most notorious prisons, where, according to his lawyers, he spent time in solitary confinement and has been subjected to various forms of torture.

"There are moments during our meetings at Guantanamo when he pauses and softly shakes his head in disbelief that he's still at Guantanamo and justice has not prevailed for him," said Kebriaei.

The dioceses sponsored Ameziane during the summer through a refugee-sponsorship program, but the case appears to be caught up in red tape.

The Anglican Church has a long history of sponsoring refugees - about 1,000 over the past 25 years for the Montreal dioceses - and says it was spurred to act after reading Ameziane's harrowing accounts of his time in prison.

"Having read what Djamel has suffered and the risk he would face if returned to Algeria, I am convinced that sponsoring him is the right thing to do," said Barry Clarke, Anglican bishop of Montreal.

Human-rights officials are calling on the Canadian government to fast-track Ameziane's case, given his detention and taking into account he has a brother in Canada.

Ameziane's case is not like the high-profile detention of Omar Khadr, the only western citizen left at Guantanamo, says Janet Dench, executive director of the Canadian Council for Refugees.

"The Canadian government, whether you agree with them or not, say (Khadr) must face charges against him," Dench said. "That is not the case with Djamel. He's there without any charges against him."

Despite being denied refugee status in 2000, Ameziane's circumstances have changed in eight years, Dench said.

"Canadian law recognizes that refugees at risk of violence, torture and arbitrary imprisonment are in urgent need of protection: this is clearly Mr. Ameziane's case," Dench said.

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