

Arar says he's proud to be a Canadian

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He thanks citizens for help, support and says having his name cleared 'means the world'

RICHARD BRENNAN
OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—Maher Arar jokes that the public inquiry into his treatment consumed so much of his time that his son thought it was his job.

"Even my (5-year-old son Houd), every time I leave the house, he'd ask me, 'Are you going to the public inquiry?' He thinks the public inquiry is my job," Arar said yesterday, referring to Justice Dennis O'Connor's hearings.

The usually restrained Arar, 36, showed signs of a sense of humour and certainly a sense of satisfaction after receiving \$10.5 million compensation from the federal government and an apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper for Canada's role in his torture more than four years ago in a Syrian prison.

"In doing so, the government of Canada and the Prime Minister have acknowledged my innocence. This means the world to me," Arar told a press conference in Ottawa.

"I feel proud as a Canadian," said the software engineer, who had a promising career before he was arrested in September 2002. That is before the RCMP gave U.S. officials incorrect information on his being a terror suspect, which led to deportation to Syria where he was jailed and tortured for almost a year.

Arar said that he fought not just to clear his own name.

"We got to make sure what happened to me never happens



TOM HANSON/CP

Maher Arar smiles as he discusses the government's apology and compensation package at a news conference in Ottawa yesterday.

again," he said, including alleged attempts by someone in the RCMP to smear his name after Arar returned to Canada in November 2003.

"I want to pay tribute to the Canadian people. Without support of the Canadian people I may never have come home. And I would not be able to stay

strong and push for the truth," he said, acknowledging there were times he almost lost hope.

His Toronto lawyer, Julian Falconer, called the apology and compensation "nothing less than a triumph of innocence."

Falconer said anyone who considers the \$11.5 million, which includes \$1 million for legal fees,

a windfall should stop and consider that no amount of money could compensate for what Arar suffered.

"He spent the 10 months and 10 days never knowing which day he would be tortured, never knowing whether he would live or die. To those who would suggest that money could somehow

fix this or have rendered him whole, I say to you that is absurd," he said.

Arar moved from Ottawa to Kamloops, B.C., with his wife, Monia Mazigh, and their two children last summer to live a quiet life.

"The struggle to clear my name has been long and hard and my

kids have suffered silently and I feel that I owe them a lot and I feel now I can devote more time to being a good father to them and to being a good husband and to rebuilding my life," he said.

Arar said he still gets upset with the way he is portrayed in the media, where he is often referred to as former terror suspect. That kind of label, Arar's lawyer said, can't be erased from the public's consciousness and "is something he is stuck with for life."

Arar's next battle is to clear his name in the United States, which may be far tougher, it appears, considering the U.S. refuses to take his name off its no-fly list, despite evidence compiled in Canada that he is not and never was a terror suspect. He is suing the U.S. government.

Arar said Canada should continue to exert pressure on the U.S. to remove his name from the list. Because he is still on it he cannot fly to a third of the world's countries.

"It is important. It's not just myself; it's a question that touches all Canadians," he said. "Can we really trust the Americans, who we consider our partners in the fight against terrorism? How much confidence can we give them?"

Arar talked of this fear of tangling again by chance with U.S. officials.

"About two months ago, I flew from Calgary to Toronto and thank God I did not know (until shortly before arrival) that we were actually most of the time in U.S. airspace," he said.

His heart also raced on a March trip to Belgium to speak to the European Parliament, when the flight from Canada flew briefly over Bangor, Me.

"I have to be careful, cautious as long as I am still on the watch list in the United States."