

Increased Somali fighting could jeopardize kidnapped journalists

By JASPER SEREN
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CALGARY—Worsening violence in Somalia has heightened concerns for the safety of Alberta journalist Amanda Lindhout and a colleague who were kidnapped for ransom last August.

According to news reports, increased fighting in and around Mogadishu means negotiations to free Lindhout and Australian Nigel Brennan have ground to a halt.

The pair is reportedly being moved from house to house in an effort to stay ahead of the fighting, which has encroached into the part of the city in which they are said to be held.

Lindhout and Brennan, a photo-

grapher, were among several people kidnapped near Mogadishu on Aug. 23, 2008. The other abductees, a Somali journalist and two drivers, have been released.

Lindhout was last heard from on May 24, when she told the Agence France-Presse news agency in a phone interview that she had been held hostage for nine months and was in a "very dire and very serious" situation.

"Unless my government, the people of Canada, all my family and friends can get \$1 million, I will die here, okay. That is certain," she said.

Brennan also spoke, saying he had been shackled for four months and that his "health is extremely poor and deteriorating rapidly due to extreme fever."

AFP said the pair seemed to be reading from a prepared script. When asked for more details about her health, Lindhout said: "I cannot answer any question that you have. What I just said, that's all I can say."

Julie Payne, manager of Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE), says the AFP interview at least shows that Lindhout and Brennan are still alive.

"It's awful that it's been nine months, but on the other hand, I think the fact that they've lived this long is perhaps a very strong indication that that's a reason for hope."

Foreign Affairs, which declined to comment, has been working to secure Lindhout's release. Payne says the instability of the Somali government has likely inhibited negotiations.

"It's an extremely lawless country, and there's not even a stable government with which the Canadian government can work. I'm sure that's one of the reasons that it's been so drawn out."

Payne added that the government "is in touch with Amanda's family and I've heard that Amanda's family trusts that the Canadian government is doing everything in their power to free her."

Battles between radical Islamist militia groups Hisbul-Islam and al-Shabab in Mogadishu have displaced more than 60,000 civilians since 7 May, causing one of the worst humanitarian crises Africa has ever seen, Oxfam said on Tuesday.

Pro-government forces last week launched a counter-offensive against the insurgents, who control much of southern and central Somalia.

CFAJ, along with the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ), has called for the release of Brennan and Lindhout. NUSOJ reported an "appalling brutal"



Amanda Lindhout photographs refugees. FACEBOOK HANDOUT

wave of violence against Somali journalists in 2008, particularly in the southern regions of the country.

Payne says Somalia "is one of the most dangerous places on Earth to be working as a journalist, and I think that this goes for foreign journalists and local journalists. We've been in touch with local journalists who have had to flee."

Lindhout, who was working on a freelance project in Somalia, has

reported as well from Iraq and Afghanistan—countries that are also known to be perilous for reporters.

Canadian journalist Khadija Abdul Qahaar, formerly known as Beverly Giesbrecht, was kidnapped by the Taliban last November. Today, she remains held for ransom somewhere in Pakistan. In a March 20 video, Qahaar said she believed she would be killed by the end of the month.

"She was obviously under a great deal of stress and extremely worried for her safety, and believed that the kidnapers would kill her if the government didn't pay the ransom. We have not heard anything since," says Payne.

In Canada, Lindhout's friends and colleagues are trying to raise awareness and keep her case in the spotlight through Facebook pages, YouTube videos, and a website.



Journalist Amanda Lindhout, from Sylvan Lake, Alberta, was kidnapped along with Australian photographer Nigel Brennan near Mogadishu last August. FACEBOOK HANDOUT

Guantanamo court resumes with squabbling lawyers

QUANTANAMO BAY U.S. NAVAL BASE, Cuba (Reuters)—The Guantanamo war crimes court wheezed back into session long enough on Monday to allow a young Canadian defendant to fire most of his squabbling U.S. military lawyers.

In the first session since President Barack Obama took office in

Khadr's judge will not rule on extending the stay until he determines which lawyer speaks for Khadr. He set a hearing on July 13 to revisit the issue.

Khadr was first charged in 2005 but the charges have been dropped and refilled several times as the court itself has been dissolved and reincarnated to address legal challenges and fairness issues that critics have called insurmountable.

Khadr was 15 when captured in Afghanistan and 16 when sent to the detention camp on the U.S. Navy base in southeast Cuba. He is now a 22-year-old with a short bushy beard and would face life in prison if convicted of murder and conspiring with al Qaeda.

No new trial date has been set and the Obama administration has not announced whether Khadr will stay in the military tribunal system. But the judge, Army Colonel Patrick Parrish, warned Khadr that switching lawyers would not necessarily win him further delays.

"It's not the first unfairness I'm going through," Khadr replied. "I'm expecting more unfairness."

While that dispute played out at a hilltop courtroom at Guantanamo, a U.S. judge in Washington ruled that the government cannot keep secret the unclassified evidence that it says justifies the continued imprisonment of more than 100 Guantanamo Bay prisoners.

Chinese protest
In another part of the Guantanamo camp, a group of prisoners who have been ordered freed by the U.S. courts held an impromptu news conference to express their frustration at still being held.

Journalists are not allowed to speak to prisoners or record their voices, but the Chinese Muslim captives known as Uighurs used newly issued sketchbooks and art supplies to make a book of protest signs. One held the book while another flipped the pages for reporters to read through a razor-wire topped fence.

"We are the Uighurs being oppressed in prison though we had been announced innocent according to the verdict of court," one page said. "We need to freedom," read one poorly phrased sign.

Guards shooed reporters away when the Uighurs started shouting, "Obama didn't release us, why? Obama is a communist or democracy?"

The United States acknowledges the 17 Uighurs pose no threat but will not send them to China because it believes they will be persecuted there. It has not found another country to take them but has refused to settle them in the United States.

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The Obama administration is sorting detainees into four groups: those to be released or sent to other countries; those to be tried in the regular U.S. courts; those to be tried in revised military tribunals; and those to be held indefinitely because they cannot be prosecuted but pose a threat.

Obama has been deluged with criticism, especially after announcing he would move some foreign terrorism suspects to maximum security prisons in the United States.

He also outraged liberal supporters with his decision to keep the widely criticized Guantanamo tribunals established by the Bush administration but is rejigging the rules to limit hearsay evidence and ban the use of evidence obtained through cruelty and coercion.

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January, defendant Omar Khadr told the military judge he could no longer trust his Pentagon-appointed defense lawyers because they had been fighting among themselves for months.

"They've been accusing each other and pointing fingers at each other ... I want to erase all of them," said Khadr, who is accused of killing a U.S. soldier with a grenade during a firefight in Afghanistan seven years ago.

His lawyers would not discuss specifics but said they disagree on what is in Khadr's best interest.

The judge let Khadr fire all but one of them until his Canadian advisers can help him choose a permanent replacement.

Obama has ordered the Guantanamo detention operation shut down by January 2010 and asked military judges to freeze the pending trials for 120 days to give his administration time to decide how to proceed.

The freeze expired and prosecutors have asked for another 120 days' delay as the Obama team sorts out which of the 240 Guantanamo prisoners should be tried, where and how.

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