

June 26, 2010 at the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Ottawa

As mentioned, this is my second visit to this Embassy this year. A group of us were here in April to show our opposition to the Male Guardianship System in Saudi Arabia and to raise awareness of the plight of Nazia Quazi, a Canadian citizen unlawfully being detained in Saudi.

As a Canadian Navy veteran who served in the Gulf war in 1991, my comrades and I were awarded the 'Liberation of Kuwait' medal by the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in appreciation of our efforts in helping to bring peace and security to the gulf region. I admit, when I accepted this medal, I was ignorant to the fundamental inequalities of women in Saudi society. I was unaware that Saudi Arabia was a closed society whose principals, customs and laws are based on unwavering belief in the literal interpretation of ancient religious doctrine. Women are routinely treated like property and are deprived of the basic human rights we take for granted every day. Under the Male Guardianship System they are at the mercy of their all-controlling male guardians for all personal decisions wrt child custody, travel, healthcare, employment, marriage etc. This situation is unacceptable in this day and age.

Had I been aware of the situation, I may not have accepted this medal. The medal's value to me was in that it represented the successful quest for freedom for the oppressed people of Kuwait as recognized by their friends and neighbours in Saudi Arabia. In reality, there is no such freedom for the women in Saudi society.

On that day in April, myself and 2 other gulf war vets, Capt (rtd) John Jackson and Capt (rtd) Lou Travis, who is here today, relinquished our 'Liberation of Kuwait' medals back to Saudi Arabia as a gesture to demonstrate our complete opposition to the Male Guardianship system and to demand the immediate release of Nazia.

Despite the advance notice, there was no-one here to receive us that morning. In fact, our presence at the embassy was acknowledged by embassy staff calling in RCMP to prevent us from trespassing on embassy property. Truly a sign of disrespect to someone whom they had previously chosen to honour. We ended up returning our medals by shipping them directly to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Saudi Arabia.

Since that day in April, we are all very pleased to see that Nazia Quazi has become a free woman. I believe the support of this group was instrumental in spearheading her release.

Today, I would like to announce that another Gulf war veteran has come forward and pledged to return his "Liberation of Kuwait" medal in support of Nathalie Morin and other women oppressed by the Male Guardianship System. That gentleman is Chief Petty Officer first class (retired) Micheal Larocque of Bridgewater NS. Today, we appeal to other gulf war vets across this country and from our coalition partners to stand with us for the sake of basic human rights for the women and children in Saudi Arabia.

Mike is creating a website where Gulf war vets can get in touch with us to lend their support. The site is called "Gulf War Vets against Male Guardianship System in Saudi Arabia" The website will be linked to the existing Nathalie Morin Support group web page.

I acknowledge it takes time to change deep-rooted attitudes, laws and customs and it is Saudi Arabia's business how their own citizens are treated but it is very much our business how Canadian citizens are treated abroad. It's been 5 years since Nathalie started reaching out for help. We have seen a lot of talk from the Canadian government but nothing has changed and we fear for the physical safety and psychological well being of Nathalie and her children. We implore the Canadian government to take immediate action to demand that Saudi officials release them without further delay.

By stepping up now, this is a unique opportunity for Canada to stand out as true champions of universal human rights and is it also an outstanding opportunity for the government of Saudi Arabia to make a timely and redeeming gesture in the eyes of the world.