

Canadian Journalists Abroad

UPDATE: KHADIJA ABDUL QAHAAR

Khadija Abdul Qahaar is a freelance journalist from West Vancouver who was kidnapped by the Taliban in November 2008 while travelling in Northern Waziristan, Pakistan. She was abducted with two companions, her driver Zar Muhammad and translator Salman Khan, both of whom were released after eight months in captivity.

In early 2009, Qahaar's kidnappers threatened to behead her. They demanded US \$2 million in ransom and the release of their associates, but the deadlines came and went. Glen Cooper, a long-time friend of Qahaar's who was involved in negotiations to free her, last heard from her in August 2009.

In November 2010, the newspaper *Indian Express* reported that she had "died following prolonged illness," citing unnamed sources. According to Khan, Qahaar, who is also known as Beverly Giesbrecht, suffered from hepatitis and was mentally prepared for her death. Cooper has said that she was ill even before the kidnapping. Rahimullah Yusufzai, an editor of the *News International* in Peshawar and a negotiator for her release, told the *Globe and Mail* that she sounded desperate and seriously ill in her final video messages. He presumes that she is dead.

When CJFE contacted Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada in March 2011, it would not comment on whether Qahaar is still alive. Spokesperson Priya Sinha said, "we continue to pursue all appropriate channels, including with Pakistani authorities, in seeking information with regard to Ms. Giesbrecht."



Khadija Abdul Qahaar, also known as Beverly Giesbrecht

Qahaar is a 53-year-old former media and web professional turned journalist. She converted to Islam soon after the Sept. 11 attacks and set up the website *Jihad Unspun* to present uncensored reports on the American war on terror. In the summer of 2008, she moved to Pakistan, where she established contact with Taliban leaders. She obtained a visa in Canada based on letters from Al Jazeera, but it is unclear whether she had an assignment when she was kidnapped.

JOURNALISTS ATTACKED IN EGYPT

During the two weeks of peaceful protests that led to the ouster of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, journalists were assaulted and harassed by pro-Mubarak supporters. Canadian journalists were among the victims.

On Feb. 2, CBC News cameraman Sylvain Castonguay was brutally attacked until his colleague, Jean-François Lépine, got soldiers to intervene. The *Globe and Mail*'s Sonia Verma and Patrick Martin were detained for three hours on Feb. 3. The CBC, CTV News and Quebec-based television network TVA also had their cameras and audio equipment confiscated by the authorities.

Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, ABC News, BBC, CNN, France 2, Le Soir, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were also targeted.



Sylvain Castonguay in Egypt, 2011



Hossein Derakhshan and his girlfriend, Sandrine

CANADIAN-IRANIAN JOURNALIST STILL IMPRISONED IN IRAN

Canadian-Iranian journalist and blogger Hossein Derakhshan remains in prison after he was arrested in November 2008 during a trip to Iran to visit his family. Charged with spreading propaganda against the regime, insulting religious leaders and cooperating with hostile states, he was sentenced in September 2010 to 19½ years in prison and banned from political and media activities for five years. Derakhshan's lawyer has appealed and is awaiting a ruling from the court.

Known as the "Blogfather of Iran" for popularizing blogging in the country after he published a guide on blogging in Farsi, Derakhshan started blogging soon after moving to Toronto from Tehran in 2000. He is a controversial figure, as he was a reformist before supporting the current government under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, based in New York, has reported that Derakhshan has spent almost 10 months in solitary confinement and was tortured to force a confession. He was briefly released for two days in December 2010 on an unprecedented US \$1.5-million bail.