

Family fears for safety of alleged spy in Egypt

COLIN FREEZE AND HOSSAM EL-HAMALAWY

TORONTO, CAIRO -- Family members of an alleged spy jailed in Cairo are pressing Canada to "do something" for the 31-year-old Egyptian Canadian, who feared for his safety in Egypt years before his arrest.

The United Nations refugee agency has confirmed to The Globe and Mail that Mohamed Essam Ghoneim el-Attar was granted asylum in Canada in 2002, after he expressed fears he would be persecuted in Egypt.

He was arrested Jan. 1, after he flew to Cairo of his own volition. It is not clear why he travelled to Egypt. Ottawa has not commented on the case.

Newspapers in Egypt have speculated that Mr. el-Attar fled Egypt for Turkey six years ago because he is gay and fears discrimination. Turkey doesn't recognize asylum seekers from the Middle East, so he was resettled in Canada.

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Records from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees show his asylum claim was deemed a worthy one, and federal Canadian agencies agreed with the assessment. No agency is speaking to specific details of Mr. el-Attar's refugee claim.

For more than a week, Egyptian prosecutors have been trumpeting allegations that Mr. el-Attar has admitted to being a long-time spy. While in custody, prosecutors say, he admitted that he worked for Israel, at the behest of a Mossad-backed espionage network operating in both Canada and Turkey.

Israeli officials deny there is any such spying operation. Human-rights groups say confessions from detainees in authoritarian Egypt must be greeted with skepticism.

Little is known about Mr. el-Attar's life in Canada. He worked as a teller for CIBC in downtown Toronto.

Egypt has alleged that he has revealed the identities of Mossad handlers living in Turkey and Canada, and is urging that they be arrested and sent to Egypt for trial.

Canada, which has no extradition treaty with Egypt, has not said whether it would oblige the request. In the past, human-rights concerns have scuttled attempts to deport fugitive Egyptians from Canada.

It's unclear just how much Ottawa, if at all, is pressing Cairo to respect Mr. el-Attar's legal rights. Federal authorities have never publicly acknowledged Mr. el-Attar as a citizen. His family says there is no doubt.

"Mohamed, after all, is a Canadian citizen, and they have to do something," Mr. el-Attar's maternal uncle, Anwar Fouad, said last week, as he tried to locate his nephew inside the Egyptian prison system.

While Mr. el-Attar estranged from many relatives, several are trying to help him. Last Wednesday, the uncle and a lawyer visited a series of jails, including ones that hold high-value detainees. They didn't find him.

He is scheduled to appear in court on Feb. 24. Prosecutors are believed to have disclosed the alleged confession dossier to the defence. But no visits have been granted.

Last week, Mr. Fouad expressed fears that the trial could begin at any moment, without his nephew having adequate legal representation. "In case we fail to secure a [prison] visit, we will submit an official request to the Canadian embassy in Cairo to intervene," he said.

A Canada-based spokeswoman for the UNHCR told The Globe that Mohamed Essam Ghoneim el-Attar is acknowledged to be at risk of persecution in Egypt.

