OPINION

An ambassador’s regret: Canadians aren’t treated equally when they run into trouble abroad

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Nineteen years ago, the federal government went to extraordinary lengths to seek justice when Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi was arrested, then raped, tortured and murdered by Iranian officials in Tehran. The atrocity, which was taken up by international press-freedom organizations, triggered an across-the-board downgrading of relations by Ottawa that would culminate in sanctions and the closing of our embassy.

I was a mid-level diplomat at the time. This unhesitating concern for a solitary citizen who ran into trouble overseas was, I thought, deeply impressive. It made me proud. But the reality is that, for reasons that are opaque and invite speculation, some seriously “distressed Canadians” (as they are known in the business) receive Kazemi-like attention from our government, while others get almost none.

In Colombia, where I served from 1997 to 2000, diligence was the rule. When citizens were kidnapped, they unfailingly became the embassy’s top priority. With strong support from the federal government, we were constantly in touch with the victims’ family members and/or employers, with potential mediators and with the local security forces should the family request it. We even assisted with flights home when needed. We did not pay ransom – and we neither encouraged nor discouraged payment by family members or employers.

It was a different story in Pakistan, where I was by 2008, when another kidnapping file came across my desk. Beverley Giesbrecht, an aspiring journalist from Vancouver, had been detained in the country’s remote Tribal Areas and was being held for ransom by the Pakistani Taliban. She had been seeking an exclusive interview with Osama bin Laden.

Coincidentally, Robert Fowler – formerly an adviser to several Canadian prime ministers, an ambassador to the United Nations and a deputy minister of defence – was seized at the same time in Niger along with a serving Canadian diplomat, Louis Guay. Mr. Fowler and Mr. Guay’s case received immense publicity in Canada and the personal attention of then-prime minister Stephen Harper, thanks in no small part to the energetic lobbying of the men’s families, friends and colleagues in government. It probably helped that Mr. Fowler is the brother-in-law of a former governor-general. They were released unharmed after 130 days in detention. It was later alleged that a ransom had been paid to al-Qaeda, but the Canadian government denied involvement in that.

Another case at that time earned only slightly less attention. Amanda Lindhout, like Ms. Giesbrecht, went in search of a good story but ended up being kidnapped and horribly abused in Somalia by a group called Hizbul Islam. Family members raised her ransom, and she was released in 2009. The RCMP tracked the group’s ringleader assiduously, eventually trapping him in Ottawa six years later; he was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Mr. Fowler and Ms. Lindhout both wrote bestselling books about their ordeals.

And Ms. Giesbrecht? She had only one reluctant former friend back in B.C., who was in no position to pay a large ransom and was uneasy about acting as her de facto next of kin. Her real family had disowned her. Those she thought of as colleagues in the press shunned her as naive and delusional. Ms. Giesbrecht, it was pointed out, ran a controversial blog that was sympathetic to al-Qaeda. But the website broke no Canadian law, and in fact the Taliban perceived her as a spy, not a sympathizer.

I took it upon myself to see what we could do about getting some medical treatment for her in captivity; videos released by her kidnappers had shown her in a dire state, held in a stone hut in the mountains and barely able to breathe on account of chronic asthma. I lined up the Red Cross to deliver medication. Then, as I sat in a delicate meeting in Peshawar with the key go-between, there came a shocking instruction from the RCMP: “Break it off. Now.”

Beverley Giesbrecht did not live to write her story. She died in captivity, unnoticed and largely unmourned, some weeks later. The ransom demanded had by the time of her death fallen to a paltry US$7,000. Her body was never recovered.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

Let’s also look at the situation of Richard Lokeya. He was born in southern Sudan but came to Canada as a child, fleeing that country’s interminable civil wars, and became a citizen. Shortly after South Sudan became independent in 2011, he returned to the land of his birth – where I was now posted as ambassador – only to find it once more embroiled in conflict.

Mr. Lokeya [ran into trouble](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-canadian-is-among-thousands-who-disappeared-in-south-sudan/) in mid-2015 by speaking out at a public meeting against the governor of the state where he was born. From the Canadian embassy, we made phone calls and managed to get him released from prison. His family and friends advised him to leave the country before the governor – a retired brigadier-general – got to him.

Mr. Lokeya fled across the border to Uganda with two friends. But they were arrested and handed back to a liaison officer of South Sudan’s army, the SPLA. They were taken to a notorious, clandestine detention centre in Juba (the capital of South Sudan) known as the White House.

One of the [friends recounted](https://sudantribune.com/article54731/) what happened next: “We were subjected to severe torture in the White House including physical assault, arm and finger twisting, burning, cold water. We were forced to sit on chair fitted with needles, they pricked our testicles and they sexually abused us at night. … At night 20 of us were taken to Rajaf near the River Nile and they twisted the neck of everybody and strangled us and threw us in the river. I was the last to be strangled but I did not die. When I was thrown in the river I struggled and came out alive.”

Mr. Lokeya was one of those who was strangled to death. A few months later, another Canadian, Joseph Amul, was also picked up by the SPLA. He has never been seen again.

What did Canada do? As ambassador, I made formal inquiries of the South Sudanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I raised Mr. Lokeya’s disappearance with the minister of defence and the country’s top general. I put the word out among human-rights organizations, in case there was information to be had. I cornered the South Sudanese ambassador to Canada when he was making a home visit to Juba. I was stonewalled. The lack of resolution for both Mr. Lokeya and Mr. Amul was my main regret when the time came, a few months later, to pass the baton to my successor.

What has happened since? Nothing that Global Affairs Canada is prepared to disclose. There appears to have been no formal protest to the South Sudanese government – certainly no public demand for investigations, no summoning of the country’s ambassador. And while we have taken advantage of new Canadian legislation, the Magnitsky law, to sanction 181 rights-abusing and/or corrupt officials [in 20 countries](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/sanctions/consolidated-consolide.aspx?lang=eng#dataset-filter) so far, those responsible for these two killings have not made it onto the list.

For their part, the RCMP interviewed the surviving witness to Mr. Lokeya’s murder back in 2016 (the agency has jurisdiction overseas, where the case could be considered a war crime and/or when torture was allegedly involved). It seems they found him credible. But they have not followed up.

Contrast this passivity with the mobilization last year of the entire Canadian political establishment to secure the freedom of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor when they were detained in China: the rallying of a diplomatic alliance around the world; the phone calls from the Prime Minister to the U.S. President; the (costly) appointment of a VIP ambassador; the strain placed on our relations with a superpower.

By our inaction in South Sudan, we have sent a signal to powerful people in Juba that our regular sermons on human rights and the rule of law in that country can safely be ignored. It is likely that those responsible for these deeds have gone on to torture and kill others. This while the country has risen steadily in the rankings to become Canada’s fourth-largest recipient of foreign aid ($115-million in 2021).

And here’s the conclusion to be drawn from the sad stories of Richard Lokeya, Joseph Amul and Beverley Giesbrecht. If you or your loved ones need serious help in some hot spot abroad, by all means look to the Canadian government for help. But know that some Canadians are more important to Ottawa than others.