

Ottawa faces \$2.5M suit over ID mix-up

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Julian Falconer wants an independent public inquiry – for the "callous, incompetent, and reckless behavior on the part of government officials." Video by Randy Risling. (August 21, 2009)

John Goddard Staff Reporter

Even photos on her digital camera – showing her at the Eaton Centre and riding to Pearson airport – failed to persuade Canadian officials in Africa that they were dealing with a Torontonian.

Suaad Hagi Mohamud filed a suit yesterday against the Canadian government for \$2.5 million in compensation for her sometimes horrific, sometimes surreal 86-day quest to prove her identity.

In an exclusive print interview, she also added details about the response of Canadian diplomats she turned to for help in Nairobi, Kenya, and spoke of her darkly existential meditations on the question: Who am I?

"This is me in my apartment, I showed them that," Mohamud said flicking through photos on her small Canon camera.

"Here is my son. This is my neighbour's kid. This is me at the Second Cup at the Eaton Centre."

Mohamud, a 31-year-old native of Somalia, bought the camera in March for a planned three-week visit to Kenya to see her mother.

Her problems began as she prepared to return to Toronto on May 21. Two Kenyan KLM airline employees were checking passports. One of them, she recognized.

"It's not the first time I've travelled to Kenya," she said. "The other two times I was seeing the same guy."

Mohamud knew what would happen next – the bribe solicitation. Her face looked thinner than her photo, the man said. Her lips were bigger, her eyeglasses different.

"First they put you in a miserable way," Mohamud said of the routine. "They scare you. They say, 'You're going to miss your flight.' Then they see you panicking – 'Who is going to pay my ticket?' "

If she showed confidence, they would let her through as they had before, she thought. Instead, they sent her to Kenyan immigration's airport custody.

"I wouldn't be stopped at the Kenyan airport if I'm a white," Mohamud told the CBC last night.

A KLM spokesperson in Amsterdam has said airlines are obliged to check passports under International Air Transport Association rules.

Mohamud expected Canada to back her up.

The next day, two officials from the Canadian High Commission, a man and a woman whose names she does not know, came to the airport. When she entered a meeting room, Mohamud spotted a photo on the desk.

"That's my son, that's my baby," she told them, and picked up the photo. She had provided it 10 years earlier during her immigration process to Canada.

"They took it away from me," she said.

Mohamud next produced her now-famous ream of documents, beginning with her driver's licence and OHIP card, and ending with a Shoppers Drug Mart Optimum card and receipt from her neighbourhood Brighten Cleaners.

When these made little impression, she remembered her camera. But the Toronto scenes left the officials similarly unmoved.

"They kept saying, `You are not Suaad,'" she said. Her lips and glasses were wrong, the Canadians agreed. "Maybe she has a twin sister," they apparently told Kenyan officials afterward.

Yesterday, Mohamud continued to flick through her photo files.

"I started taking pictures of myself," she said, of a period of self-doubt that followed. "What don't I see that other people see? Did I change that much? How could I not look like myself?"

"I became obsessed," she said. "Did I have plastic surgery and not know it? What is wrong with me?"

Despite the ruminations, Mohamud persisted with the high commission, asking that they take her fingerprints and call her employer. But they labelled her an "impostor" and the Kenyans sent her to jail.

"One old lady had blood on her hand," Mohamud told a news conference on the compensation suit yesterday, describing an inmate. "Everybody said it was from the person she killed.

"I slept on the floor ... I got sick. I thought I was going to die. I thought I would never see my son again."

In the end, her self-possession and 12-year-old son saved her. Her mother bailed her out of jail after eight days, and her Toronto friends raised attention with parliamentarians and the media.

"What would have happened if I had brought my son to Kenya?" she told reporters. "What would have happened if I had nobody in Canada to match my DNA?"

After returning home last Saturday, Mohamud spent two days in hospital suffering respiratory problems and loss of appetite.

"I was alone when my government let me down," she told reporters. "I'm only going to court so this will not happen to another Canadian."

Civil litigation lawyer Julian Falconer, who represents Mohamud in the compensation case, also called for a public inquiry into what he called the "callous, incompetent and reckless behaviour on the part of government officials."

With files from Robert Benzie