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The two were en route from Toronto to al-Shifa hospital in Gaza, according to reports, when they apparently took a wrong turn.

By Hadani Ditmars | Aug. 22, 2013 | 3:20 PM

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Tora Prison, where Mubarak was held before his release on Thursday. Photo by AFP

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Two Canadian men who were arrested in Cairo last week while on their way to Gaza remain held at Egypt's Tora prison, despite diplomatic pressure for their release.

Some 50,000 people have added their names to an online petition demanding the immediate release of the two men, Tarek Loubani and John Greyson.

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Following a consular visit to Tora prison on August 18, a message was reportedly relayed to friends of the two that the pair were "okay." Late on Thursday it was reported that they had met with a Canadian consular official and a lawyer, who said that they were in "high spirits."

Loubani, a 32-year-old emergency room physician and son of Palestinian refugees, and filmmaker and York University professor John Greyson, 53, were en route from Toronto to al-Shifa hospital in Gaza, according to reports, when they apparently took a wrong turn.

The two reportedly arrived in Cairo on August 15th, and were arrested the next day by Egyptian police.

Loubani and Greyson are now being held in Tora prison, about 16 miles south of Cairo. Long condemned by human rights groups for alleged abuses, the prison is where former President Mubarak was detained since February of 2011, as well as top members of the Muslim Brotherhood who have been held there since July. Mubarak was released on Thursday.

"Mubarak goes free and Tarek and John are still in jail," says Tarek Loubani's brother Mohammed.

According to their associates, Loubani and Greyson had been planning to travel to Gaza where Loubani had established a partnership with his medical faculty at Western University in London, Ontario and helped set up an advanced cardiac life support program, and where Greyson hoped to research a documentary film. Their travels, however, were thwarted by a border closure at Rafah, according to their friends and family.

Exactly what happened to the pair in the 24 hours that followed their arrival in Egypt's chaotic capital is unclear.

Their emergency contact, Greyson's York University colleague Justin Podur, says he received a call from Loubani at 4 P.M. Toronto time on August 15th.

"Tarek called me," recalls Podur, "and said 'we're being arrested by Egyptian police.'" Then, he says, the phone went dead.

Podur, a professor of environmental studies and a friend to both men who has since set up a blog with regular updates for media and supporters, says he later learned from Canadian consular sources that the two had apparently stopped at a police station to ask directions when they got lost en route back to their hotel, just around curfew time and in close proximity to ongoing protests.

This story leaves some friends and family – who have yet to speak directly with the pair – puzzled as to why the apparently street-smart pair would have stopped at a police station at night to ask directions in the midst of violent clashes between the military and Muslim

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“Tarek and John were both seasoned, savvy travelers,” asserts Greyson’s sister Cecilia, a Halifax based artist and writer.

“John was in Baghdad last winter training Iraqi filmmakers,” she notes of her brother, who she says was also part of a Canadian flotilla to Gaza in 2011 that was turned back before it could land.

And Tarek, whose Palestinian parents were respectively 1948 and 1967 refugees who settled in Kuwait before immigrating to Canada in 1990, had made many trips to Gazan hospitals via Egypt, his associates say. Doctor Amit Shah, a colleague of Doctor Loubani, says he travelled with him to Gaza in November of 2012 shortly before Operation Pillar of Defense.

No formal statement on the Canadians’ status has been issued by Egyptian authorities and no charges have been issued. But a statement released by Egyptian media including the ONA news agency and the Al-Youm Al-Sabea newspapers on August 20 reported that Egyptian prosecutors had obtained an order to detain the two, caught up in an apparent dragnet with seven other foreigners including a Turkish journalist and four Irish nationals, for up to 15 days without charge.

The statement claimed that the foreigners were being investigated for crimes ranging from “threatening social peace” to being part of an armed gang and storming a police station.

On August 19 Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said at a press conference, “We don’t frankly know what evidence supports any such arrest, and we have expressed our concerns directly to the Egyptian government.”

“These are not formal charges,” states Professor Podur, “and this 15-day detention order is also not a jail sentence – it is just a detention order pending investigation.” Podur notes however that it is an order that can be extended indefinitely.

In a statement released August 20, Lynne Yelich, junior foreign affairs minister with Canada’s foreign affairs ministry, said “We were disappointed to learn today that Dr. Loubani and Mr. Greyson will continue to be held in detention. The Government of Canada is deeply disappointed by this decision as there continues to be a lack of evidence. Canada will continue to engage with the highest levels until this matter is resolved.”

In an emailed statement, Yelich said it appeared to be a case of “two people being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

The detained men’s families meanwhile say they have hired an Egyptian lawyer, Adam Khaled El Shalakany, who said Wednesday that the Egyptian Film Makers Syndicate has filed a complaint to the Public Prosecutor about the case and is awaiting a reply.

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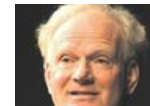
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