

Mahdi Nazemroaya in Tripoli. A Man of Courage, Committed to Truth in Media

Friends fear for Canadian journalist stranded in Libya

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OTTAWA — Friends of a Canadian freelance journalist stuck in Libya as a violent rebellion seems poised to sweep dictator Moammar Gadhafi from power say they have grave concerns for his safety after frequent communications from him stopped Monday morning.

Mahdi Nazemroaya, a 29-year-old from Ottawa, has been in Tripoli for two months covering the situation in the region for a number of international news agencies, including Al Jazeera and Russia Today.

“We are fearing for his life,” said Michel Chossudovsky of the Centre for Research on Globalization, with which Nazemroaya is affiliated.

“He is a Canadian. . . . (He’s) in a hostile environment and there’s no exit strategy for an independent journalist,” said Chossudovsky, a professor at the University of Ottawa.

Both Chossudovsky and Briton Amos, a longtime friend of the journalist, said they had been in frequent daily communication with Nazemroaya by telephone and online video chats, but said that all lines of communication went dead at about 10:30 a.m. ET on Monday.

Chossudovsky said Nazemroaya — who has been critical of rebel forces, the transitional council and NATO in many of his reports — has been stationed at a hotel that is housing members of the foreign media.

He said that at one point, the freelance journalist came under fire when he went on the hotel’s rooftop to hang a sign making potential attackers aware that the facility included media occupants.

Nazemroaya recently completed a sociology degree from the University of Ottawa and is scheduled to begin graduate studies at Ottawa’s Carleton University in September, Chossudovsky said.

For now, Chossudovsky said studies are not front and centre on the student’s mind.

“He hasn’t slept for three days,” he said. “He’s been very courageous . . . but he’s very much aware of the danger.

“The whole atmosphere in that media centre is one of tremendous fear and intimidation by

everybody, but much more by those who don't have a satellite phone or a backing from a news agency and also the fact that he's not an experienced war correspondent. That's why I discouraged him from going, but he wanted to go and he went.

"He's in a very fragile situation and we would like our government to protect him in any way they can."

In a report with Russia Today posted early Monday, Nazemroaya — who is of Iranian descent and came to Canada at the age of four — appeared shaken at the current situation in the region and expressed a strong desire to get out of the country with other journalists.

"I think an airlift is the best thing for us, or an escort," he said in the report.

"We are at their mercy. That's the honest truth. We don't have weapons, we're sitting here, just waiting. We can't take any action . . . so our governments and the international community has to take action to get us out of here."

Chossudovsky and Amos said the Department of Foreign Affairs is aware of the situation.

The department was not able to provide information on Nazemroaya on Monday.

Amos, who describes Nazemroaya as being "like a brother," said in one of his last communications Monday morning he said: "If I don't leave soon, I'll be killed. I was threatened."

Amos said Foreign Affairs officials have instructed Nazemroaya to contact the other national embassies, including Tunisia and Hungary, to seek possible assistance in leaving the country.

Canada closed its embassy and withdrew its consular staff from Libya in February.

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