

Family of jailed Facebook faker 'devastated'



Fouad Mourtada in an image taken from a website in support of him.

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The siblings of a Moroccan man jailed for impersonating a prince on Facebook says they are being intimidated by authorities when visiting the prison where he is being held.

Amina Mourtada, a Toronto computer engineer, told CTV.ca that her brother and sister had personal documents confiscated during a Tuesday visit to Morocco's Oukacha jail. It was the first of their weekly visits since 26-year-old Fouad Mourtada was convicted of "modifying and falsifying information technology data and usurping an official's identity" on Friday.

She said her siblings felt as though guards were trying to prevent them from returning to the prison.

"(The guards) took from them Fouad's cheque book as well as some personal documents," Amina Mourtada told CTV.ca on Wednesday. "It was like they were trying to scare them away."

Sentenced to three years for creating a profile under the name of Moroccan Prince Moulay Rachid on social networking website Facebook, the young engineer has been held in jail since his arrest in early February.

In a report published Wednesday, Amnesty International said Fouad's rights were breached during his arrest and interrogation, and that he was denied access to a lawyer during some points in the proceedings.

Fouad claims he was kidnapped Feb. 5 by a group of men in street clothes, taken to a secret location where he was beaten and forced to "confess" he created the profile in order to "get girlfriends." He said he was transferred to a police station on Feb. 6, which is the date Moroccan authorities list as his official date of arrest.

According to Amnesty, which had two monitors at Fouad's trial, the reason behind the arrest seems to be the royal family's stated mandate to crack down on "anyone deemed to be undermining the monarchy and what the prosecutor termed the social and sacred values of Morocco."

The group has called on Moroccan authorities to ensure that allegations Fouad was mistreated while in custody are "fully and impartially investigated."

"Anyone found responsible for ill-treatment should be brought to justice," Amnesty International spokesperson Benedicte Goderiaux said in the report. "No information, including any 'confession' obtained under torture or ill-treatment should be admitted as evidence in court, in accordance with international standards, including human treaties to which Morocco is a party."

"The authorities should ensure that Fouad receives a new trial in accordance with international standards of fairness or that the conviction be reversed and he be released."

Prince Moulay Rachid is the younger brother of Morocco's King Mohamed VI. Mourtada admitted to creating the Facebook profile, but said he did it as a fan of the prince. He did not use the profile to communicate with anyone, although he did create an email address under the assumed identity.

The Mourtadas are appealing the ruling and say they are worried about Fouad's living conditions. According to his sister, the young engineer is now living in a section of the jail that houses dangerous offenders.

"I am completely shocked and devastated," said Amina Mourtada. "But I am doing my best to help my brother from here."

Amina said she has sent emails and placed phone calls to Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs but had had no response. She said she'd like to see Canada stand up for Fouad since so many Canadians use Facebook and because she is a Canadian citizen.

In the meantime, she's part of a massive online movement to support the young Moroccan by way of the same website that got him into trouble. The "Help Fouad Mourtada" Facebook group has amassed 3,282 members and is working to organize March 1 demonstrations in cities around the world, including one outside Montreal's Moroccan consulate on Saturday at 2 p.m.

"We're hoping to mobilize people all over the world to get our voice heard," she said, adding the Moroccan community in Paris has taken on the issue with notable fervour. "We're hoping Morocco will respond to some international pressure."