

They could just kill him; prisoner's wife

Canadian man jailed for past 12 years in Bulgaria for embezzlement

BY RICHARD FOOT

The wife of a Canadian businessman jailed for the past 12 years in Bulgaria says she fears that authorities will murder her husband in prison, rather than transfer him to Canada.

"We're not even sure if he'll get out dead or alive," said Tracy Kapoustin, whose husband, Michael, is serving a 17-year sentence for embezzlement. "They could just kill him over there, and no one would know."

The Vancouver entrepreneur became a prominent player in Bulgaria's economy in the 1990s during the free-wheeling early days of capitalism that followed the collapse of communist rule. In 1994, the couple, then living in Sofia with their infant son, became the target of anonymous death threats.

Two years later, Michael Kapoustin was arrested on a variety of white-collar criminal charges and eventually convicted in 2002 of embezzling millions from his own company.

Maintaining his innocence, he has tried unsuccessfully for years to have his sentence transferred to a Canadian prison. Last year, the Conservative government, led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, began actively lobbying Bulgaria for his transfer.

Ms. Kapoustin said yesterday that her husband's life is in danger because of what he knows about official corruption in Bulgaria, including information about government figures who, she claims, enriched themselves off his company after his arrest.

"He fears for his life," she said in an interview yesterday from her home in Penticton, B.C. "All of his assets have disappeared, into government hands probably. And who knows what they've done with them? Mike knows. And he'll ask, 'What happened to

my assets' when he gets out."

Living with her now 14-year-old son at her parents' home, Ms. Kapoustin has only seen her husband twice since 1996.

The last time was in January during a visit to his prison in Sofia, accompanied by Dean Peroff, a Toronto-based international lawyer who has taken up the family's case.

"No one can imagine the stress and uncertainty we have been through," she said. "Sometimes I feel just like dying."

Ms. Kapoustin says the Canadian government is partly to blame for her husband's fate. In 1996, an RCMP officer working out of the Canadian Embassy in Austria gave information to Bulgarian officials that contributed to her husband's arrest.

But the lowest point in the family's ordeal came in 2005, when Liberal MP Dan McTeague, at that time parliamentary secretary to the minister of foreign affairs, sent a letter to the incarcerated Canadian, saying Canadian government efforts to secure his transfer had come to an end.

"Canadian officials cannot seek preferential treatment for you," the letter said. "There is no further possible action to be taken."

"The government abandoned us," Ms. Kapoustin said. "I thought he'd probably spend the whole 17 years in there, or that he wouldn't get out of there alive."

The family's hopes were revived in 2006 when the new Harper government, including Penticton's MP, Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day, began pressuring Bulgaria to transfer the jailed businessman to Canada.

The case has also been taken up by Mr. Peroff and a team of experienced former Canadian diplomats, who insist he deserves, under international treaty, to be transferred to a Canadian prison.

"We need Mike transferred home," Ms. Kapoustin said. "Twelve years have been long enough. The Bulgarians let out murderers and rapists, but they won't let out my husband."

CanWest News Service