

New Questions in Lockerbie Bomber's Release

Give this article

By John F. Burns
Aug. 21, 2009

LONDON In the wake of the sole convicted Lockerbie bomber's return to a hero's welcome in Tripoli, questions intensified in Britain on Friday as to whether lucrative Libyan oil contracts were as much a factor in his release as compassion for a dying man.

The bomber, Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, suffering from terminal prostate cancer, was freed from a Scottish prison on Thursday and flown home in a V.I.P. jetliner to scenes of jubilation in Libya that were broadcast around the world, angering many in Britain and America, including President Obama.



In a photograph released by the Oya newspaper, Saif al-Islam el-Qaddafi, son of the Libyan leader, right, with Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi upon his arrival in Tripoli, Libya, Thursday after his release by Scotland.

Oya newspaper, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

On Friday, Lord Trefgarne, chairman of the [Libyan British Business Council](#), said Mr. Megrahi's release had opened the way for Britain's leading oil companies to pursue multibillion-dollar oil contracts with Libya, which had demanded Mr. Megrahi's return in talks with British officials and business executives.

Lord Trefgarne told the BBC that talks on oil contracts had "not moved as fast as we would have hoped and expected" since Tony Blair, then prime minister, [met in a tent in Libya five years ago](#) with Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader, and set the terms for the "deal in the desert" that sketched a reconciliation between Colonel Qaddafi's pariah government and the West.

British business executives had made no secret of their intense lobbying for a prisoner transfer treaty proposed by Mr. Blair and Col. Qaddafi and finally ratified by Britain and Libya in April; before Mr. Megrahi's cancer diagnosis, that treaty was seen as the most likely avenue for his return to Libya. But his cancer, and a finding by medical specialists that he was not likely to live more than three months, cleared the way for his release on compassionate grounds.



Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, the only person convicted in the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, was welcomed home in Tripoli as a hero late Thursday.

Amr Nabil/Associated Press

"Perhaps now, with the final resolution of the Lockerbie affair, as far as the Libyans are concerned, maybe they'll move a bit more swiftly," Lord Trefgarne said.

Although there was no firm evidence of any quid pro quo between Britain and Libya, the British government acted vigorously on Friday to defend itself against accusations that it paved the way for the Libyan's release to promote British-based oil companies' hopes of securing pole position in the international contest for new Libyan oil concessions.

Foreign Minister David Miliband told the BBC that it was "a slur both on myself and the government" to suggest that oil was a factor.



In Lockerbie, Scotland, a memorial commemorated the victims of the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am jet over the village, which killed 270 people.

Jeff J. Mitchell/Getty Images

The release of Mr. Megrahi, 57, and the officially orchestrated welcome he received from hundreds of flag- and placard-waving Libyans when he arrived at Tripoli airport with Colonel Qaddafi's son Seif al-Islam el-Qaddafi has incited controversy on both sides of the Atlantic, with the government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown facing bitter condemnation from opposition parties.

On Friday, the White House spokesman, Robert Gibbs, described the scenes in Tripoli as "outrageous" and "disgusting," adding fresh momentum to President Obama's condemnation of the Libyans' behavior on Thursday and the enraged comments of many of the American families whose relatives were among the 270 people killed when Pan Am Flight 103 exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988.

The American outrage stirred an intense and bitter debate in Britain over who really bore responsibility for freeing Mr. Megrahi, and why. He had served only eight years of a life sentence handed down by a specially convened Scottish court in the Netherlands, which specified that he serve a minimum of 27 years. David Cameron, the Conservative leader, condemned the release as "wrong" and the product of "completely nonsensical thinking."



In December 1988, police officers and investigators looked at wreckage from Pan Am Flight 103.

Associated Press

The British government and the Scottish government, which made the formal decision to free the bomber under justice powers transferred to Edinburgh under the Blair government, each appeared to be trying to shunt responsibility to the other. Both governments were met with a wave of denunciations in Britain's national newspapers, which reported the release under banner headlines like "An affront to justice" and "A shabby deal," many of them alleging that the hunger for oil deals was the original catalyst for letting Mr. Megrahi go. Meanwhile, Mr. Megrahi continued to insist on his innocence, telling The Times of London that he would "put out evidence" exonerating himself and that the people of Britain and Scotland would "be the jury." Asked who was responsible for the bombing, he said, "It's a very good question, but I'm not the right person to ask."

Prime Minister Gordon Brown released a copy of a letter he sent to Colonel Qaddafi on Thursday, asking the Libyan leader to handle Mr. Megrahi's homecoming "with sensitivity" and restraint. Downing Street aides said Mr. Brown was appalled by the celebrations, and they insisted that responsibility for the release rested solely with the Scottish government.

But the Scottish justice secretary, Kenny MacAskill, announcing the release on Thursday, pointed to the disengaged attitude of the Brown government as one of his reasons for approving the release. He said officials in London had shunned his request for advice on the matter, and withheld information he sought about reports that Britain had given guarantees to the United States at the time of Mr. Megrahi's conviction that he would serve out his full term in Scotland.



Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi held his prisoner release papers as he walked toward the airplane at Glasgow International Airport on Thursday.

Pool photograph by Danny Lawson

Officials in London leaked word on Friday that they were considering canceling a trip to Tripoli in early September by the Duke of York, second son of Queen Elizabeth, who has made a reputation for promoting British business interests in parts of the world where Britain has played down its human rights agenda as it has sought oil deals and other lucrative contracts.

But while signaling a willingness to take what would be a largely symbolic step away from Colonel Qaddafi, British officials said they intended to press ahead with other efforts to promote business with Libya.

And both Mr. Brown and Mr. Miliband refused to say whether they supported or opposed the Scottish government's action. In a BBC radio interview, Mr. Miliband skirted four separate attempts to pin him down on the matter.



Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi with security officers in 1992 in Tripoli.

Minaouche Daghaiti/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In Edinburgh, Alex Salmond, the Scottish government leader, told the BBC that while the scenes in Tripoli were "wrong" and "insensitive," he stood by the decision made by Mr. MacAskill, the justice secretary. Scotland had acted with no motive other than compassion for a dying man, Mr. Salmond said.

A similar argument was put forward on Thursday by Mr. MacAskill, who said that the "humanity" that prompted his decision was "a defining characteristic of Scotland and the Scottish people." In a remark that critics in Scotland said was more appropriate for a pulpit than a quasi-judicial decision, he said that Mr. Megrahi now faced "a sentence imposed by a higher power."

But even Mr. Salmond could not escape suggestions that oil interests were a powerful if unacknowledged factor. Yields from Scotland's own oil industry have been diminishing, and some critics in Scotland suggested that Mr. Salmond, a former oil economist for a Scottish bank, might have seen long-term benefits for Scotland beyond its reputation for compassion.