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Deported family of fugitive Kazakh banker return to Rome

By Guy Dinmore in Rome

The wife and daughter of a fugitive Kazakh banker have arrived back in Rome seven months after they were arrested and wrongfully deported to Kazakhstan in a case that strained relations between the two countries and triggered a political furore in Italy's coalition government.

Alma Shalabayeva and her six-year-old daughter Alua arrived at Rome's Fiumicino airport with their lawyer on a Lufthansa flight via Frankfurt. Ms Shalabayeva was joined by her two other children living in Europe and they were escorted by Italian officials to meet foreign minister Emma Bonino who had lobbied for their release by Kazakhstan.

The Kazakh authorities agreed to allow the mother and child to leave the country temporarily after her parents posted their house in Almaty as security for bail. Ms Shalabayeva is under investigation in Kazakhstan on suspicion of illegally obtaining her passport, which she denies.

Ms Shalabayeva is married to Mukhtar Ablyazov, former chairman of BTA Bank and a political activist who is in prison in France facing extradition requests by Ukraine and Russia in connection with alleged fraud at the bank. Kazakhstan, which nationalised the bank, has also charged him with fraud, which he denies.

Italy deported the pair from Rome last May after they were seized in a raid by police on a Rome villa where Mr Ablyazov was believed to be staying, acting on a false tip-off from the Kazakh authorities. Italy later accused Kazakh diplomats in Rome of exerting improper pressure on Italian interior ministry officials to deport them and asked Kazakhstan to return them after revoking the deportation order.

A UN human rights committee said their deportation had amounted to an "extraordinary rendition". Their case triggered a political furore in Italy, leading to the resignation of a senior interior ministry official and a deterioration in relations with Kazakhstan, an important commercial partner.

Mr Ablyazov, a former energy minister, has accused the Kazakh authorities of using his family as political pawns and says the case against him is politically motivated because of his criticism of Nursultan Nazarbayev, president of Kazakhstan.

Peter Sahlas, lawyer for the family, said on Friday that the deportations from Italy had "revealed the illegal methods of a Central Asian dictator who stooped as low as to take hostage the wife and daughter of his main political opponent".

Ms Shalabayeva released a statement thanking Italy's foreign ministry for defending their human rights and helping them to leave Kazakhstan.

The Ablyazov family maintains that Kazakhstan decided to release the mother and child in order to help gain the extradition from France of Mr Ablyazov who was arrested there last July. A court in Aix-en-Provence is due to hold its next hearing in January.

Ms Shalabayeva's temporary release does not end the legal battles surrounding her deportation, however. Her family has launched a criminal complaint in Italy accusing three Kazakh diplomats in Rome of aggravated kidnapping. The Kazakh embassy has denied wrongdoing.

Mr Ablyazov fled Kazakhstan in 2009 and was later granted political asylum in the UK where he was told by London police that his safety was in danger. He fled the UK in 2012 after he was sentenced to 22 months in prison for contempt of court related to cases brought by the nationalised BTA bank alleging "massive fraud" in its attempt to recoup \$6bn.

Chris Hardman, a lawyer for BTA Bank in the UK, said this month that the English High Court had found Mr Ablyazov to have committed major frauds against the bank and that in the latest ruling in November the court had made a judgment of \$300m against him.

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