Published on Private Sector Development (http://blogs.worldbank.org/psd)

Tunisia's Cash Back: The start of more to come?

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It is welcome news that Tunisia has received $28.8 million corruptly acquired by the country’s former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The money emanates from a Lebanese bank account held by M. Ben Ali’s wife, and was handed over in the form of a check to Tunisia’s current President Moncef Marzouki, by Ali bin Fetais al-Marri, Qatari attorney-general and the UNODC Special Advocate on Stolen Asset Recovery.

This is a good day for asset recovery. First and foremost it is a victory for the Tunisian people and the Tunisian government. It demonstrates that the consistent and patient efforts undertaken by the authorities in Tunis, including the Tunisian Financial Intelligence Unit, the Committee for the return of Stolen Assets, and the Ministry of Justice, are now paying off. It also marks a success for regional cooperation, with this first recovery of stolen assets taking place within the Arab
World. It came about following decisive action in 2011 by Lebanese Authorities in freezing the Beirut bank account of Ben Ali’s wife, Laila Trabelsi, at the request of the Tunisian government, and then subsequent judicial procedures in both countries for the return of the funds. The involvement of Ali bin Fetais al-Marri is also welcome, in helping to achieve what is hoped to be the first return of stolen funds back to Tunisia.

Tunisia stands to gain even more – imminently - with the anticipated return of a yacht seized in Italy. The Italian authorities ruled last year on the return of the vessel owned by a member of the Ben Ali family, and that judgment now appears about to become a reality. Estimates by the Tunisian media vary widely on the total value of the assets stolen by the former President and his entourage, but there is a clearly a lot more waiting to be discovered and returned.

The role of the international community is critical in helping Tunisia and other Arab Countries in Transition, to undertake asset recovery. The Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR) has provided continuous technical assistance to the Tunisian Authorities conducting the cases since the fall of the Ben Ali regime and will continue to do so. Efforts continue apace throughout the region on this issue.

Last September, the first meeting of the Arab Forum on Asset Recovery took place, co-organized by Qatar and the United States Presidency of the G8, with support from StAR. It brought together financial centers, Arab countries in transition and other Arab countries (including Lebanon). The Arab Forum on Asset Recovery serves as a coordinating mechanism on asset recovery, through periodic meetings and other activities, with the support and involvement of the regional partners. This year a series of technical sessions are taking place to equip all the participants with the knowledge and practical tools and foster bilateral discussions and coordination to make asset recovery happen internationally. These technical meetings will lead up to the second meeting of the Arab Forum scheduled for October 2013.

Today’s return to Tunisia is a very important signal that asset recovery can work. This is a welcome and timely encouragement to practitioners, courts, and political leaders. We hope this milestone will lead to more action globally, to ensure that there are no safe havens for stolen assets, either within the Arab World, in global financial centers or elsewhere.

• Tags:
  • Tunisia
  • Stolen Assets
  • corruption
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