

Terror suspects held in brutal conditions in British jail

Harvey Thompson
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Detainees held in Britain in the aftermath of the September 11 bombings are being kept in “barbaric” conditions, according to medical experts.

The seven suspects at Belmarsh high-security prison in south-east London, all male Arab Muslims, are being kept locked up for 22 hours a day and are prevented from seeing daylight. On detention they were not allowed access to their lawyers or to their families, and are still unable to speak to their families in Arabic without the presence of an official translator, who only visits once a week. The men were given just five days to appeal against their internment.

Female prison officers have subjected the detainees to body searches—an action especially offensive to practicing Muslims. The men are also prevented from praying, apart from a period of 15 minutes on Fridays, without an imam (Muslim priest).

Gareth Pierce, the legal representative for several of the prisoners, told the *Observer* newspaper January 20, “These men have been buried alive in concrete coffins and have been told the legislation provides for their detention for life without trial.”

The Home Office’s own medical experts have condemned the conditions the seven suspects are being held in as “barbaric”. Complaints lodged with the Home Secretary have so far received no response.

An ex-internee revealed further evidence of the inhuman conditions at Belmarsh. Djamel Ajouaou, who works as a volunteer translator, was one of eight foreign nationals held towards the end of last year as part of the Blair government’s support for the “war against terrorism”. He returned to his family home in Morocco rather than face the threat of repeated arrest.

Speaking from his mother’s house in Tangiers, Ajouaou told how the prison guards (who have dubbed the inmates “Binmen” in a derogatory reference to

Osama bin Laden) taunted the suspects, “The guards shouted at us, called us ‘Bin Ladens’ and threatened us if we didn’t strip naked.” Ajouaou was also refused medication while in detention.

Liberal Democrats Home Affairs spokesman Norman Baker said, “These are very serious allegations that require immediate investigation. If true, it is shameful that the British government has allowed these men to be treated in this way, especially when they have been convicted of no crime. Both the British and US governments have lost the moral high ground.”

The draconian regime being enforced in such facilities as Belmarsh have long raised concerns. In 1996, the government’s former Chief Medical Officer, Donald Acheson, produced a damning internal report for the Prison Service that concluded with the warning that conditions in certain secure units could contribute to mental illness. Amnesty International has also warned that lack of adequate daylight, exercise and medical treatment would lead to the mental and physical deterioration of inmates.

Muslim leaders in Britain have also condemned the conditions at Belmarsh. The leader of the Muslim Parliament, Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, announced that his organisation would be lodging an official complaint. “The government has expressed concerns over the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay [the US naval base in Cuba]—yet they are doing the same thing here.”

Inayat Bunglawala of the Muslim Council of Britain said, “The war on terrorism was meant to be a war on behalf of civilised values.”

Roger Bingham, a representative of the civil rights organisation Liberty, said, “These reports would be cause for concern if someone had been convicted of a serious crime, but these people haven’t even been

charged.”

Since September 11, there have been dozens of arrests throughout Britain. Several have been carried out under the government’s recently enacted internment legislation, which was rushed through parliament with minimum debate. Most of the remaining arrests were for alleged immigration offences.

On January 17, 17 arrests were made in London and Leicester. In the East Midlands city, police officers conducted dawn raids on several houses that had been under surveillance. Nine people were arrested under anti-terror laws and the rest under immigration laws. Six men and two women were later transferred to the custody of the Immigration Service. Two Algerian men are accused of being members of Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda network and have been remanded in custody.

Police raids have also been carried out in Newcastle, Birmingham and other towns and cities across the country. Police chiefs at Scotland Yard claim there may be “hundreds” more al-Qaeda supporters and other terrorists active in the UK.

Gareth Pierce said, “Aid workers, dissidents and those struggling against oppressive regimes all now qualify as terrorists. They are being rounded up by the police and intelligence services, who have no comprehension of the culture, religion and way of life of these refugee communities.”



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