Blair government refuses to protest false imprisonment of British nationals by Saudi Arabia

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Five Britons are currently being held in solitary confinement in a Saudi Arabian prison, having been framed for a series of bomb explosions within the country last year. An American and a British national were killed and other Western workers seriously injured during a prolonged terrorist bombing campaign that was, in all likelihood, conducted by Al Qaeda members within the oil-state.

According to testimony obtained by the *Guardian* newspaper from three Britons recently released from Saudi jails, the five have been repeatedly tortured by the notorious Interior Ministry Police looking to extract confessions for the bombings. They have been subjected to systematic mental torture, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, threats and severe beatings.

The British government has done nothing to publicly defend the imprisoned men. Instead, ministers have suppressed a top-secret report revealing details of Saudi torture methods that was circulated within the British government last year. The strategically important oil rich kingdom regularly procures vast amounts of military hardware from UK manufacturers to suppress its own population and intimidate its neighbours. It acts as a key ally of Britain and the US, under conditions where the Bush administration has made patently clear its plans to launch a war against Iraq later this year. Saudi airbases will be of paramount importance in a future all out assault on Baghdad. Evidence of extensive Al Qaeda activity operating from within Saudi Arabia would, moreover, expose the flimsy pretext on which the West carried through the bombardment of Afghanistan.

According to the *Guardian* report, the three released Britons were among a group of Western workers arrested during a series of terrorist explosions, beginning in November 2000. Held initially on terror charges, the three were eventually imprisoned on minor alcohol charges and given an amnesty last month. Four Britons remain in captivity—Sandy Mitchell, Jimmy Cottle, James Lee and Les Walker—along with a Canadian, Bill Sampson, and a Belgian, Raf Schyvens. The six have been paraded on Saudi state television apparently confessing to their part in a turf war between illicit alcohol gangs, and bombing fellow Britons. These confessions placed the prisoners in line to be beheaded in Riyadh's notorious "chop square".

The *Guardian* investigation reveals that this "turf war" is a fabrication of the Interior Ministry, intended to cover up the terrorist activities of Islamic fundamentalists inside the kingdom. All the detained men were friends. They had no connection to the victims, who themselves were only linked by the fact they were Westerners.

The Saudi authorities have failed to produce any evidence to support their claim that the bombing campaign was part of a struggle between rival gangs of illegal alcohol dealers, or to prove a link between those arrested and the bombing victims. Indeed no formal charge has been made or date set for a court case. Despite the arrests, the bombings in Saudi Arabia continued unabated.

Interviewed by the newspaper, one of the released Britons, Paul Moss, said, "They put me in an isolation cell and wouldn't let me sleep. They said, 'We know you were following orders to do these bombings'. Around every 30 minutes a guard came and ordered me alternately to stand or sit. They threatened me that if I dropped off they'd chain my arms to a pipe in the ceiling. I had no sleep at all for seven days and I collapsed, hallucinating." Another released Briton, David Mornin gave similar detailed accounts of his torture by the authorities.

Their testimony corroborates evidence compiled by human rights groups of the brutality of Saudi's Interior Ministry. Only last year, the US State Department reported, "Ministry of interior officials are responsible for most incidents of abuse, including beatings and sleep deprivation."

Paul Moss was one of those first rounded up by the Mutawa, the religious police in Saudi Arabia, in December 2000 following the first bombing. He was handed over to Interior Minister Prince Naif's security police, the Mubahith; a force that Naif chillingly boasts has a 100 percent record in solving security crimes. A special interrogation block at al-Ulaisha on the outskirts of Riyadh is utilised to torture confessions from prisoners.

"I did not have a name," Moss told the *Guardian*. "I was just

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addressed as a number throughout by an interrogator who was obviously well educated. Every time I was taken from the windowless cell two floors up for interrogation I was blindfolded and shackled."

A powerful electric light was kept on continuously in Moss's cell, while he was kept in solitary confinement for seven weeks. He was kept awake and on at least four occasions beaten badly "They hit me in the testicles with a stick. Then they hit me on the chin each time as I went down."

Physical torture was combined with mental torture. Moss was threatened with the multiple rape of his wife and told that she and their children would be framed for possessing illegal narcotics—an offence punishable by beheading under Saudi Arabian law. In the end Moss provided information about his fellow-drinkers, as well as admitting to alcohol smuggling. He says he would have falsely confessed to the bombings as well, had it been demanded.

David Mornin was also taken to the interrogation center: "They took me upstairs blindfold in handcuffs and shackles and really started on me about the bombings. They said I was a Jordanian terrorist. They said, 'confess to the bombings' from the start."

"They flung me off the walls, punched me in the gut, kicked me in the ribcage... they hammered me. They threatened to gang rape my wife, to plant drugs on her, they said they would take me to the desert and cut my throat and leave me there. When they released me I had to write a thank you note to the king, and sign to say I had not been mistreated."

Kelvin Hawkins, Mornin's father-in-law, was arrested on November 30, 2000. "My wife told them I had had a quadruple bypass so I wasn't physically mistreated," Hawkins said. "What happened to me was sleep deprivation. I was handcuffed, shackled and blindfolded and held in solitary confinement for three months. Initially they tried to get me to confess to the bombings. After I confessed to running the bar they stopped asking about the bombings. If it had gone on for long enough and physical violence was involved, you would confess to anything."

Two weeks after the first arrests, a sixth bomb exploded outside a bookshop. Prince Naif's forces tortured another false confession, this time from a passer-by, Ron Jones. When his confession failed to suit them they disregarded it, and summarily tortured another equally improbable confession to the same crime from another Briton, now facing execution.

Throughout this sordid affair the relatives of those framed up for the bombings, as well as those of the bomb victims, have been told in no uncertain terms to shut up by the British government and the Foreign Office.

When Dr Stephen Goldby, angered with government inaction over the detainees, wrote to his MP to complain about their treatment, he received a reply, drafted by Foreign Office officials and signed by a junior minister, Patricia Scotland. "The role of the FCO when British nationals are detained overseas is essentially a welfare one. We cannot demand their release. We must respect the Saudi system of law as we would expect them to respect ours," the reply stated. "[You are] concerned that the detainees have been held for a considerable time without charge. The Saudi justice system works in a different way to our own ... You will understand that we cannot intervene in the judicial process of another country."

After the *Guardian* published the revelations concerning the Saudi captives, Prime Minister Blair was forced to send his personal envoy, Lady Symons, to Riyadh. But the foreign trade minister came back empty handed and red faced from a meeting with Crown Prince Abdullah, the kingdom's de-facto head of state. Abdullah informed her in no uncertain terms that full Saudi judicial process would be followed.

Despite the captives being held in solitary for fifteen months without charge, the Foreign Office is continuing to try to censor the whole event by claiming that private negotiations will prove most effective in saving the lives of the captives.

In its dealings with foreign states the Blair government always give maximum precedence to the interests of British corporations. Britain has 30,000 expatriates in Saudi Arabia, the majority of whom service lucrative British Aerospace arms deals, which pay £1.5 billion per year to that corporation.

The Blair government is greatly concerned not to jeopardise such profits. In 1980, the broadcast on British television of the programme "Death of A Princess" told the story of a Saudi princess executed for adultery. In response Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador and cancelled £200 million of arms contracts. That business debacle taught the Foreign Office and incumbent British governments a lesson they have done their best to adhere to ever since: in public utterances never mention the complete absence of democracy or civil rights inside Saudi Arabia.

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