

WSWS interview:

Father protests indefinite detention of son at Guantanamo Bay

Richard Phillips
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It is 19 months since American military authorities began jailing prisoners captured in the US-led war in Afghanistan at Cuba's Guantanamo Bay, where they are denied all access to lawyers and their families. Among more than 660 prisoners from 42 countries in the concentration camp-style jail are two Australians, 27-year-old David Hicks and 46-year-old Mamdouh Habib.

Hicks, who travelled to Afghanistan in September 2001 and was involved in the civil war between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban regime, was captured by the Northern Alliance in late 2001. Habib was arrested by Pakistani police on October 5, 2001, two days before the onset of the US-led assault on Afghanistan. A contract cleaner, Habib left his wife and four children in Australia in late July 2001, travelling to Pakistan with the aim of finding an Islamic school for his children. He was transported to Egypt where he was held incommunicado for five months before being sent to Afghanistan and then dispatched to Guantanamo Bay.

Despite constant questioning by US authorities and several interrogations by Australian intelligence officers, the two men have not been charged with any offence and no evidence has been released connecting them with Al Qaeda or the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Early this month, Terry Hicks, David's father, decided to have himself locked inside a metal cage outside the Liberal Party's national convention in Adelaide, South Australia, in order to draw attention to his son's illegal detention. The protest attracted widespread international interest and further highlighted the conditions at Guantanamo Bay, which violate basic democratic rights, breach the Geneva Prisoner of War Conventions and constitute an international scandal.

Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal-National Party government, which has become the Bush administration's most dependable ally, has refused to condemn these illegal detentions or call for the release of Hicks or Habib. In fact, senior government ministers, including Attorney General Daryl Williams, have publicly supported the imprisonment of the men, claiming that they are being treated humanely.

According to testimony from some of the 32 Afghans and three Pakistanis released over the past three months, conditions in the jail are nightmarish with numerous suicide attempts and prisoners kept on high doses of sedatives. Twenty-year-old Shah Muhammad, a Pakistani held for 15 months, told the *New York Times* after his recent release that he was in such despair that he attempted suicide four times. "It is against Islam to commit suicide," he said, "but it was very difficult to live there... They treated me as guilty, but I was

innocent."

Twenty-two-year-old Rustam, a former Taliban fighter from Afghanistan, told the newspaper that he attempted to hang himself after he was placed in a cell block with mentally ill prisoners. He was forcibly injected with a high-dose tranquiliser, which he said prevented him from being able to eat properly or control his head or mouth for weeks. He was given sedative pills until his release.

Dr Nauimi, a lawyer for some of the 150 Saudi prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, has also revealed that Mish al-Hahrbi, a Saudi teacher, is in the jail's hospital with severe brain damage after he attempted suicide earlier this year. US authorities have refused to confirm the prisoner's name but have admitted that a man has suffered serious brain damage after trying to kill himself.

Legal action by families to secure a formal trial or release of their loved ones has not been successful up to date, with American courts ruling that they have no legal authority in Guantanamo Bay. While the judiciary claims to have no jurisdiction, US authorities are planning to construct an execution chamber at the camp in advance of military tribunal hearings.

Terry Hicks recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about his protest outside the Liberal Party conference and his political experiences in the campaign to free his son.

Richard Phillips: When did you last hear from David?

Terry Hicks: The last letter from David was about four weeks ago. It was very short but it said that he missed us, was very tired and that the last six months had been exactly the same as the previous six months. About a third of the letter was censored and just below that part David had written, "That's Cuba for you". We don't know exactly what he was referring to but could pick out some words in the censored area. It said something about a particular task not being carried out and that his reading light and books had been taken from him.

This is obviously designed to wear him down and is another small example of the sort of intimidation they use to try and break people. There was no date on the letter but it did say that he thought it was some time in March, which means that he has no real comprehension of the days and months at the moment.

RP: The Bush and Howard governments keep insisting that the prisoners are being treated well.

TH: Well maybe a few of these officials should be taken on a tour of a dog pound because that's what the conditions in Guantanamo Bay are like. If that's considered humane then I'd hate to see some rough treatment. The government says they are well fed at Guantanamo Bay but the prisoners don't have any rights. How can holding someone for

19 months without charge and no sign of a trial be considered humane?

Try to imagine what it's like sitting in one of those cages. You know you're only going to get two 15-minute exercise periods a week and you have all day to sit around in a cage to think about whether you're ever going to get out. Today is the same as tomorrow and the next day and so on. It's difficult to imagine what effect this has on a human being, but it can't be very healthy.

There have been at least 28 suicide attempts that we know of in Guantanamo Bay. If the conditions are so good why are people trying to kill themselves? Obviously prisoners get to the limit and can't take it anymore. It's a shocking situation where the only way they can scream out for help is by trying to take their lives.

RP: Last month the *New York Times* reported that the US wanted to release David but that the Howard government was holding it up. Do you think this is true?

TH: I always say that where there's smoke there's fire, so I'd like to believe it. The Australian government was certainly embarrassed about the story and it brought them to their knees for a while. The news also came at the same time as the Pakistan government was saying it wanted to release Jack Thomas but was being stopped by Australia.

Whatever the case, nothing surprises me about this government. Australia is the only country in the world that has not made a request for the return of its national citizens from Guantanamo Bay. It's a sad state of affairs when you have a government that is prepared to take action to support the repatriation of drug dealers [to Australia from Asia] but will do absolutely nothing for two citizens who have not been charged with anything.

RP: How do you cope with the constant worry about David's fate?

TH: I'm involved in a football club, and have been for 30 years, so there's training two nights a week and the game on Saturday and the club members have been very helpful. This keeps my mind off the problems a bit. The hardest time is late at night, just before I'm about to go to bed. I start thinking about how David is getting on, what he's doing and all that. Of course the Fair Go For David committee is doing a great job and they've built up wide support from all round the place.

RP: Can you give some examples?

TH: The response from ordinary Australians has been absolutely brilliant. We've had letters from Broome, which is at the top end of the country, and since my protest outside the Liberal Party conference, a lot more support has come in. There have been donations and people have contacted, asking what they can do to help.

There have also been poems and songs about David and someone has even written a play. I went through the play with the author recently and hopefully it will be up and running in about six months. It's a question of getting a good director. And of course there is a film documentary, which is going ahead in leaps and bounds.

RP: In the first year of David's detention you were not so public. When did you decide to become more proactive?

TH: At first I tried to do the right thing by going through all the government departments. But it was like banging your head against a brick wall. Then we had our appeals to the American courts rejected on stupid technicalities, like the claim that the US has no legal jurisdiction over Guantanamo Bay.

After about a year of this sort of bull.... I said to the lawyer we've got to try and get to ordinary people to keep our fight in front of the population, to let them know the truth, and then we will win support.

This is what we've been trying to do, through the media and other ways, and I think it's working or at least it's embarrassing the government.

I've also had a quite bit of attention from the media lately, which helps to get our message across. In the last two weeks the BBC, a South African radio station and a lot of the Australian media have interviewed me about the situation. At the same time all the lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and what the Australian government knew about Bali is starting to unravel. All this is helping to open eyes and shows that people around the world are starting to ask more and more questions about what is going on.

RP: Do you see any connection between the Howard government's refusal to demand David's release and democratic rights in Australia?

TH: Yes, I do and we hope that what we're doing will begin to open people's eyes. We have a situation where David, Mamdouh Habib and 600 others in Guantanamo Bay have been held for nearly two years without charge. Most of them are in Guantanamo Bay because they've been dobbed in by people in Afghanistan or Pakistan in exchange for money. It's bad enough that the Australian government allows this to happen but then you realise that it's going in the same direction with its anti-terror laws and the new ASIO legislation.

These laws are a real threat to our democratic rights. You could be standing on a street corner or in a hotel talking about something that someone considers dangerous, they can contact ASIO, and you could be locked up and held for weeks on end.

The Howard government says all this is to stop terrorism but what it really means is that our basic democratic rights are being torn up. You could be locked up on suspicion for as long as the government pleases under these laws. You won't be able to argue with them, they'll just take you away.

When you look at what they're doing it seems that our so-called democracy is just about knackered and people are being brought under scrutiny on every level. As well as the anti-terrorism laws, the government is trying to create an atmosphere of suspicion and fear in the community and turn people against each other. It is a very unhealthy situation.

Since David's capture and his detention in Guantanamo Bay we've become very aware how the Australian government isn't as righteous as everyone seems to think. We've learnt a lot over the last 19 months and I think if others were in our situation they'd begin to realise what is going on.

I'm just a normal bloke but it doesn't matter how normal you are. Anyone could end up in a situation that changes their whole life. People have got to understand that this isn't just a question of David Hicks, it's something that could hit anyone.



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