Filmmaker speaks with WSWS about Guantanamo Bay and David Hicks

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Filmmaker Curtis Levy spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* recently about *The President versus David Hicks*, his documentary about the illegal detention of David Hicks, a 28-year-old Australian citizen held without charge for over two years in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Levy has been producing documentaries for over 30 years. He began his career as an assistant producer for a commercial television network, made his first film about children's theatre in 1973 and then worked for ABC television. During the 1970s he produced a number of films for the Institute for Aboriginal Studies—*Lockhart Festival* (1974), *Lurugu* (1974), *Mourning for Mangatopi* (1975), *Sons of Namatjira* (1975) and *Malbangka Country* (1977).

The award-winning director has made five films about Indonesia, including *Riding the Tiger* (1992), a three-part series on the Suharto dictatorship, *Invitation to a Wedding* (1995) about Islamic dissidents, and *High Noon in Jakarta* (2001) on the Wahid presidency.

Some of his other documentaries are: *Breakout* (1984), which examines the mass escape of Japanese soldiers from an Australian prison camp during World War II; *The White Monkey* (1987), about Father Brian Gore, an Australian priest who was framed up for murder and imprisoned by the Marcos regime in the Philippines; *The Queen Goes West* (1989)—a wry look at an Australian outback town's preparations for an 80-minute visit by Britain's Queen Elizabeth; and *Hephzibah* (1998), an exploration of the complex life of Hephzibah Menuhin, sister of acclaimed violinist Yehudi Menuhin.

Richard Phillips: Why did you decide to make the film?

Curtis Levy: I was having coffee one morning and reading all the sensational headlines denouncing David Hicks as a traitor and began to wonder whether anyone could be as bad as he was being portrayed. What had this guy from the suburbs of Adelaide, a former rodeo rider and stockman, done to deserve all this?

I've always been interested in anyone who has been demonised by society and seem to have an obsession about incarceration. So I thought it would be important to get to the truth of all this and show what this guy was really all about. My experiences with Islam in Indonesia also made me curious about David's decision to become a Muslim. Contrary to what [Australian Prime Minister] John Howard says about Hicks, things are always more complex than they appear.

RP: What was your main aim?

CL: To humanise David and explain his journey. I was also concerned about his legal plight. Even now, two years later, nobody has come up with any real evidence against him.

RP: Having worked in Indonesia, have you seen anything to compare with the violation of basic democratic rights occurring at Guantanamo Bay?

CL: Probably not. Indonesia is pretty horrific—journalists, trade unionists and others would be rounded up and held for years—but the US is now moving in the same direction. On the face of it America is supposed to be a free country and I suppose they're not locking up journalists yet, although they do have a lot of American journalists rather intimidated at the moment. There was the case of the lawyer who was charged for defending an alleged terrorist.

Prisoners in Guantanamo Bay have no democratic rights. In some ways it's similar to what the Howard government did when it forced asylum seekers offshore to put them out of reach of any legal processes. Perhaps the Bush administration learnt from Howard on this.

RP: The citing of David Hicks' letters in the film helps to puncture the government and media sensationalism.

CL: Yes, I found his letters absolutely fascinating. They provide some real insights into how he changed and got caught up with various unhealthy elements, such as the Taliban. I don't know how sophisticated David's understanding was, but he went through a long period of religious training in Pakistan and was told that the Taliban were pure Islam.

RP: The letters also show some of his doubts during his stay in Pakistan and then his transformation into an Islamic militant, giving vent to anti-Semitic diatribes about a world Jewish conspiracy.

CL: That's true. But from my reading of the letters, he always seemed to retain a fairly innocent or naïve outlook—someone caught up in something he didn't fully understand.

I don't really understand the transformation from being a horse trainer in Japan to suddenly taking off to Kosovo and becoming a Kosovo Liberation Army fighter. Some of his friends whom I met in Adelaide said he had never been an aggressive type or expressed any wish to be a soldier prior to this. Whatever happened, it seems he became a fervent Muslim because he saw it as a way of redressing the injustice he saw in the world. In my view, if it hadn't been for 9/11, people like David Hicks, John Walker Lindh and others probably would never have been heard of, unless they'd chosen to write books about their lives.

RP: One of the civil rights lawyers shown in the film tells a press conference that he fully supports the "war on terrorism". This issue, or its real meaning, unfortunately, isn't explained in the film.

CL: I don't know, perhaps he said that to counter possible accusations that he might be aligned with the people he was defending. American lawyers are under tremendous pressure at the moment. Whatsoever the reason, the so-called war on terror has been invented by the US to deal with all sorts of movements that America doesn't agree with. Bush seized 9/11 to attack a whole lot of groups, including Saddam Hussein in Iraq, who had nothing to do with 9/11.

The phrase has little to do with looking for the perpetrators of 9/11, but is a convenient excuse to further American territorial ambitions, which are mainly oil related. And now this catchall term is used by all sorts of governments—Israeli, Indonesian and others—for attacking their perceived enemies, internal and external.

RP: As the film shows, the organisations David Hicks is alleged to have been involved with were, at one point or another, supported by the US.

CL: Yes. Pakistan's ISI [Inter Services Intelligence Agency] brought

Osama bin Laden over from Saudi Arabia to lead the Arab contingent of those forces fighting the Russians in Afghanistan. The CIA funded and trained many of these Islamic militants and Al Qaeda came out of that initial group.

American foreign policy in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has created all sorts of monsters, which are now coming back to bite them. If Musharraf's government [in Pakistan] falls to the Islamic militants, then you will have nuclear weapons in the hands of these fundamentalists.

RP: Could you speak about the impact of David Hicks detention on his family?

CL: Terry [Hicks] constantly surprises me with his resolve—it's incredible. When I saw his early television interviews he was quietly spoken and I imagined that he, and his wife Bev, held fairly conservative political values. I guess they previously thought that the Australian government would help them.

But having gone through this ordeal they are deeply angry with the government and have become very sophisticated in their understanding of what is happening. They have been transformed and have an inner strength that constantly amazes me. It shows that ordinary people can summon up tremendous reserves to campaign against injustice.

RP: And Terry's decision to visit Afghanistan?

CL: It was his first trip outside Australia and he obviously gave it a lot of thought. In the first place he felt terribly frustrated because he wasn't getting anywhere with the government. He had been to Canberra to try and meet the prime minister and Liberal party officials, but they all refused to see him. He also tried on numerous occasions to speak with government ministers and all he got was knockbacks.

He felt that the democratic process in Australia was not open to someone like him to make any impact, or even get any access. He didn't want to spend all his time in Australia bashing his head against a brick wall—or maybe it's marble in Canberra—and so he decided to visit Pakistan and Afghanistan. Retracing some of David's steps might be another way to help. In many ways I think the journey helped him understand his son a lot more and strengthened the bonds between them.

RP: Could you comment on the situation in Afghanistan?

CL: There are large areas of the country still controlled by the Taliban—an Australian helicopter pilot was shot down recently. In fact, there seems to be a resurgence of support for the Taliban, particularly in the south. Even though they represent no solution to the problems, the Taliban can appeal to those living in fear of the warlords and what they represent.

Parts of the country are very dangerous. One of the reasons the US never built the road between Kandahar and Kabul properly is because they knew it was too dangerous and so they just put down a thin layer of tar over the existing road.

We travelled with armed bodyguards and our driver was very nervous because quite a lot of people—including foreigners and aid workers—had been attacked in the last few months. The Taliban don't want the new government to establish itself in these areas.

Nobody attacked us and I think there was a bit of a lull while we were there. The Afghan people were quite friendly and we were banking on the fact that people would be sympathetic to the father of someone in Guantanamo Bay. Terry and I are older and don't look like the sort of people who might be CIA or US military or even aid workers. Having armed guards also helped, I suppose.

RP: The film includes footage you shot at Guantanamo Bay. What were you able to find out there?

CL: Not a lot. There were no real surprises. We didn't expect to find out very much but wanted to capture the surreal Kafkaesque atmosphere. It was very weird, a place where people are kept under bright lights in cages and platoons of soldiers going in and out each day.

They took us into the minimum-security area—this is where the prisoners wear white, instead of orange, uniforms and are allowed to fraternise in groups, rather than being in solitary. But we weren't allowed to talk to them and were told that if we did, the visit would be ended.

We were only there for three days—a media tour to try and give the impression that America observes human rights. The US has come under such international criticism over this that they're trying to improve their image. I guess there are a lot of uncritical journalists sent there who repeat what they're told—that the prisoners are bad people and deserve to be kept in cages.

Nobody would admit that David Hicks was there. They are not allowed to talk about any prisoner individually but refer to them as numbers. This is part of the dehumanising process so the guards become immune to cruelty—putting people in cages, not giving them any recourse to justice.

Many of the soldiers are just reservists who have no idea of the consequences of their actions. They have their own American way of life there, with McDonald's, restaurants, clubs and an outdoor cinema, and live their lives without thinking about who they're guarding. We met one of the church ministers there and asked him how he could be involved in this inhumane system. He responded with various parables to justify it.

RP: Could you comment on the Howard government's refusal to demand Hicks' repatriation?

CL: There is no evidence to suggest that Howard has ever considered requesting David's repatriation. Recent statements from government ministers make clear they don't want him back. This puts Howard at odds with every government in the world with prisoners in Guantanamo Bay.

Even Denmark, which has one of its nationals there, has asked that he be returned. Apparently he is being sent back home and will be set free when he arrives. In Britain, 112 MPs took up a petition condemning what was happening in Guantanamo Bay. But there is no sign of this sort of thing—apart from the Greens—anywhere in the Australian parliament.

RP: Did you attempt to interview any Australian government officials for the film.

CL: Yes, I wrote to Attorney-General Philip Ruddock and the prime minister telling them I was making a documentary and asking if they could appear and give their perspective on the issue. Neither responded.

RP: What was the most significant thing you learnt while making the film?

CL: That's difficult. I suppose it's that ordinary people like David Hicks and his family are very indefensible on their own against monolithic powers.

I don't see David as a saint or anything like that. Far from it. He was misled into supporting undesirable groups. But I don't see him as undesirable or anything remotely like that. I find him a fascinating character and hope to meet him some day. He had had little education and came from a difficult family situation. But he was an adventurer who got caught up in the wrong situation. No matter what he is supposed to have done it is incredible that after two years incarceration he has still not been able to prove or disprove the accusations against him. We still don't even know what the accusations are.

There has been a barrage of propaganda to justify all this. I'm very concerned that there hasn't been enough of an outcry against the government over this attack on basic democratic rights, especially the junking of habeas corpus. But I hope that my film will help to change this. There are signs that people are beginning to become concerned about this.