

Britain: Detainees returning from Guantanamo face arrest and surveillance

Richard Tyler
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Five British detainees are expected to return to Britain from Guantanamo Bay in the next 24 hours. They have been held captive for two years under conditions that amount to torture and denied all basic democratic rights. Some were captured during the US-led invasion of Afghanistan; others were kidnapped from Pakistan or other countries and then transported to Guantanamo.

The five are students Ruhel Ahmed (23) and Shafiq Rasul (25), former careworker Tarek Dergoul (24), website designer Jamal al Harith (35) and parcel worker Asif Iqbal (20).

Maxine Fiddler, the sister of al Harif, said, "We've had no assurances that he will receive justice on his return. I want to know what are the charges against him and what is the evidence against him. We've heard nothing."

Although they have been subjected to constant interrogation, no evidence has been produced to show that any of the 650 prisoners held in the US military concentration camp on Cuba are guilty of any crime. Indeed, Guantanamo base commander Major General Geoffrey Miller said the prisoners were now regarded by US authorities as a "low threat" who could not provide any further useful information.

This was echoed by Home Secretary David Blunkett, who said last week, "No one who is returned... will actually be a threat to the security of the British people."

Despite this, the returning detainees face arrest and investigation under UK anti-terrorism legislation. Anti-Terrorist Branch police chief Peter Clarke said his force would be "conducting investigations which will consider the case of each man individually."

Conservative Shadow Home Secretary David Davies has called for even tougher action. "If they fought against coalition troops on the battlefield, they should also be charged and tried in the UK. In addition, I think there may be a case for treason."

According to the *Sunday Times*, the men will be flown

to a Royal Air Force base, where they will probably be arrested under anti-terrorist laws before being taken to London's Paddington Green police station to be questioned about their links to extremist Islamic groups.

Even if no charges are brought against them, the men face constant surveillance by Special Branch and the secret services. The *Sunday Times* reports that the five will be "assigned police protection officers to ensure their safety on their return home." According to the newspaper, this is necessary since they "could be targeted by right-wing extremists." The British National Party (BNP) last year won two seats on the Sandwell local council, in the West Midlands, covering the town of Tipton, home to Ruhel Ahmed, Asif Iqbal and Shafiq Rasul. Labour councillor Derek Rowley is quoted saying, "We fear the possibility of clashes... The BNP will try to cash in if the men return."

While the BNP has made anti-Muslim sentiment the basis of many of its campaigns, the party's website contains no comment about the returning men. This raises the suspicion that either the claim of a racist backlash is a pretext in order to justify close police surveillance, or that Labour wants to be seen to be acting tough on alleged "Muslim extremists."

According to Clive Stafford-Smith, lawyer for two of the detainees, "Shafiq Rasul and Asif Iqbal are being released because they are the two British plaintiffs in our case before the US Supreme Court, which is slated to issue an opinion in late June."

Stafford-Smith says the Bush camp is fearful that the court might find the Guantanamo procedures illegal, "which would be a painful political blow just before his coronation as Republican presidential candidate.

"It was obvious in December that the Bush administration would work hard to release the 16 plaintiffs to our suit, or provide them with lawyers so that an argument could be made that they now had 'due

process’.”

Four other British citizens—Moazzam Begg (36), Feroz Abbasi (23), Richard Belmar (23) and Martin Mubanga (29)—remain in Guantanamo, and face a show trial before the “military tribunals” established by the Bush administration.

Blunkett has indicated that the four will probably face trial as they had been picked up “in the combat zone” in Afghanistan and he has claimed that the best place for a trial is in the US.

“The evidence that has been picked up is best used in the US, not in Britain, because the people who evaluated that evidence, who heard that evidence, are of course those who were present and have been involved with the interrogation process,” he said.

Azmat Begg said he was very sad his son Moazzam was not returning. He said he had received a letter from him detailing the mistreatment his son has faced since first being held at Bagram air base in Afghanistan. “He was kept like an animal, not given proper food, his clothes were torn, he did not see any natural light for one year—no sun, no moon, no sky.

“Now I have not heard from him for a long time. I do not know if he is dead or alive.”

Should any of the returning detainees be prosecuted in the UK, it would be no less undemocratic than the process in the US. In an article in the *Guardian*, Louise Christian, a solicitor acting for the families of three of the British detainees, accuses Blunkett of creating “our own version of Guantanamo Bay here, rushing through legislation to lock up non-British nationals without trial, 14 of whom have been detained for almost exactly the same length of time as the five citizens who will be returning. Despite a unanimous finding in December that these detentions are unjustified by a Privy Council committee, Blunkett has refused to release the detainees.”



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