

# Families come to US to demand release of Guantanamo detainees

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A delegation of family members of European citizens being held in the American prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, traveled to the United States this week to publicize the detainees' plight. Most of the approximately 650 captives have been held virtually incommunicado for two years or more, with no charges laid against them and no access to attorneys.

The relatives were accompanied by supporters, including prominent artists, who organized press conferences, including one following a march to the steps of the US Supreme Court in Washington DC, which is due to hear arguments on the legality of the Guantanamo detentions next month. They also conducted private visits with government officials and members of Congress, and held a public meeting on March 10 in New York City.

The US tour was organized by the recently founded Guantanamo Human Rights Commission (GHRC), based in Britain, with the co-sponsorship of the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Council of Churches, Amnesty International, and the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), which filed the case now before the Supreme Court.

Azmat Begg, father of British prisoner Moazzam Begg, delivered a letter to the White House about his son, stating, "He has [been] held captive for more than two years. In all this time, he has never been charged and tried. I do not ask for mercy, I ask for justice. Before mercy comes justice, and my son has been denied justice."

The 36-year-old Moazzam was living with his wife and three children in Pakistan at the end of 2001 when he was rousted out of bed in the middle of the night, was forced into the trunk of a car and taken to a US detention center. He was later transferred to the notorious Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and ultimately sent to Guantanamo.

The elder Begg, a retired bank manager from Birmingham, England, told the New York meeting that he

considered Moazzam the best of his five sons, because he was always seeking to help people in distress. He had gone to Afghanistan in June 2001, where he was helping to set up schools and drill water wells in remote villages. Presumably the US attack drove him across the border into Pakistan.

Azmat Begg said, "My son was not taken from the battlefield. Two Americans and two Pakistanis burst into his home and put him in the trunk of their car. His oldest daughter was eight. She understood something of what was going on, but the two younger ones were just terrified. Somehow Moazzam made a telephone call to me from the boot of the car. He said, 'I didn't do anything wrong. Don't worry about me.' But he asked me to protect his wife and children."

Azmat Begg told of receiving heavily censored letters sent from his son at Guantanamo, reporting that he had gone an entire year except for two weeks without seeing any natural light—not even the moon. Another letter stated, "I do not know what crime I am supposed to have committed. As a result, I am in a state of desperation and beginning to lose the fight against depression and hopelessness."

The conditions of confinement in Guantanamo are designed to break the spirit of the prisoners, which is aimed at producing false confessions and guilty pleas. Azmat Begg and the other relatives are not asking for the unconditional release of their loved ones, but that they be returned to their home countries where, if there is evidence they have committed any crime, it can be heard in a proper court of law.

British Home Secretary David Blunkett scheduled a Washington visit at the same time as the GHRC tour. After the British government reached an agreement with the US that led to this week's release of five British detainees, Blunkett claimed he would press for "a fair deal" for the four remaining UK citizens in Guantanamo.

Before leaving, however, he told reporters that, rather than returning the prisoners to the UK for any trial, the evidence could best be tested in the US courts “in a way that it is very hard for us to do” because of “the way evidence was collected.” He was apparently referring to the illegal interrogations and lack of legal representation for over two years for those accused, which would make trials in Britain all but impossible.

The Blair government has been under considerable pressure to explain why it has been able to do so little to ensure due process for its citizens in Guantanamo Bay, even though its position as the most important US ally was supposed to give Britain special weight in its dealings with Washington. Moazzam Begg remains in Guantanamo, being one of the few singled out for trial by military tribunal, whose rules make it a kangaroo court.

Michael Ratner, president of the CCR, told the New York meeting that the timing of the release of the five British nationals served “to divert attention from what the Guantanamo Human Rights Commission is doing here.” He explained, “What’s happening in Guantanamo Bay is the first offshore concentration camp. The US is operating in an utterly lawless fashion, like a monarchy. For two and a half years, the prisoners have no lawyers and no family contact. This is our Devil’s Island. They think they can do anything they want.”

Ratner pointed to other locations, such as Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and US bases on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, where an unknown number of additional prisoners were being held incommunicado. He compared it to the disappearances carried out under General Augusto Pinochet in Chile. “It’s torturing the families,” he said.

Also participating on the US tour was Rabiye Kurnaz, whose 23-year-old son Murat (who was born in Germany but is a Turkish citizen due to the reactionary German laws of citizenship), has been imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay. She has heard nothing of her son since receiving a postcard two years ago. “It’s very hard for me to stand this situation,” she said.

Her family attorney Bernhard Docke spoke at the New York meeting: “Everything is surreal. I don’t know my client. I cannot write, visit or contact him. Will it end tomorrow, or last a lifetime? This is like defending a phantom.” Docke continued, “German prosecutors say, ‘You can’t determine guilt without a fair trial.’ It is below the dignity of the United States, founded on the rule of law, to keep foreigners locked away in limbo. If there is any evidence, don’t you trust your courts? If there

isn’t any evidence, why not let them go?”

The third relative participating on the tour was Aymen Sassi, a student from a suburb of the French city of Lyons. His older brother Nizar, 23, has been held captive by the Americans for 27 months. “That’s the length of time I haven’t seen my brother,” said Aymen. He was taking his parents’ place on the tour, since they were too ill to travel. “My father, his whole world collapsed when he heard the news” about Nizar being arrested, he said.

The French lawyer retained by the Sassi family, Jacques Dupres, also spoke about the difficulties trying to represent the Guantanamo detainees: “We don’t know why they are there. We don’t know when they were arrested or why. We cannot talk to them. I don’t know what I am supposed to do for them. The only rights we have here is to have no rights. The powers have decided that might makes right.”

In an earlier interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s *The World Today*, Dupres condemned the French government for being “quite indifferent about what’s happened in Guantanamo.”

The Bush administration has given a cold shoulder to the pleas of the Guantanamo relatives. National Security Council spokesman Scott McCormack said Monday about the detainees: “They’ve been designated as enemy combatants and are being treated consistent with international conventions and in a humane way.” In fact, the category “enemy combatant,” which has no definition in international law, was invented by the Bush administration in order to circumvent the established norms of the Geneva Conventions and other treaties.

Even the minimal demand of the parents to see their children has fallen on deaf ears.



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