

Britain: Freed Guantanamo Bay detainees detail beatings and abuse

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Five innocent men were returned to Britain last week, after two years' illegal detention at the US concentration camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The five are—Shafiq Rasul, Ruhal Ahmed and Asif Iqbal from Tipton, near Birmingham, Jamal al-Harith from Manchester and Tarek Dergoul from East London.

In an extensive interview with the *Observer* newspaper, the “Tipton Three” provided a graphic account of the daily beatings, humiliation and abuse meted out to the 650 detainees by their US captors.

Asif described how on the boat journey from the airstrip to the prison, his American guard had hit him because he would not stop moving, which was impossible because of the swell. When a guard found out they were English, he screamed, “Traitor!” followed by repeatedly kicking Ruhal in the leg. “I couldn't move it for days, it was so badly bruised.”

Dressed in orange jump suits, hooded, gloved and shackled, the men were made to kneel on the ground for hours. “They made us kneel in that awkward way, and every time you moved, someone would kick you,” Rasul said.

“The sun was beating down and the sweat was pouring into my eyes. I shouted for a doctor, someone poured water into my eyes and then I heard it again: ‘Traitor, traitor’.”

They spent six months exposed to the elements in the open mesh cages of Camp X-ray before being moved to the metal cellblocks of Camp Delta, where the cells were the size of a large mattress, and they still faced the blistering tropical heat. Their toilet was a hole in the floor, fetid yellow water came from a tap; twice a week they could shower and take 20 minutes' exercise.

The slightest hesitation in obeying the orders of their American guards was met with punishment. The Extreme Reaction Force (ERF) delivered the worst beatings, and usually involved a prisoner being slammed onto the floor by a soldier with a riot-shield, before other ERF members further assaulted the helpless captive.

British detainee Jamal al-Harith has also described the beatings meted out by the ERF. In an interview with the *Daily Mirror* he said, “I had seen victims of the ERF being paraded in front of my cell. They had been battered and bruised into submission. It was a horrible sight and a frequent sight.”

When Jamal refused to accept an injection from a medical orderly, the ERF were sent to punish him. “I could hear their feet stomping on the ground as they got closer and closer to my cell. They were given a briefing about me refusing the injection, then I heard them readying themselves outside.”

The five-man squad, wearing full riot gear assaulted Jamal using their fists, feet, knees and batons, leaving him with severe bruising. While beating him they shouted, “Comply, comply, comply. Do not resist. Do not resist.”

“They were really gung-ho, hyped up and aggressive. One of them attacked me really hard and left me with a deep red mark from my backbone down to my knee. This huge black bruise was there for days

after that,” Jamal said.

His ordeal did not end there. Half an hour later, as he was recovering, a second ERF squad arrived to dish out another beating.

As well as frequent beatings, isolation in solitary confinement was regularly used to try to break the prisoners' resolve, with sensory deprivation being employed to add to the torment.

Ahmed told how he was placed in isolation for writing “have a nice day” on a plastic beaker, his crime was supposedly committing “malicious damage to US government property”.

Following his beating by the ERF for refusing the injection, Jamal was also taken to the isolation units. He described the psychological torture employed by guards. The detainees in the ISOs, as they were called, suffered sleep deprivation, with bright lights left on throughout the night in the cells, which were kept intolerably hot in the day or freezing cold at night by using fans in the ceiling.

“I'd wake up at 3 a.m. shivering like crazy. Just to keep a little bit warm I'd try to sleep under a metal bed to protect me from the cold air that was blowing in.”

He was put in the isolation unit on two other occasions.

“The whole point of Guantanamo was to get to you psychologically. The beatings were not nearly as bad as the psychological torture, bruises heal after a week, but the other stuff stays with you,” Jamal said.

The brutal and repressive nature of the regime is further evidenced by the fact that some twenty percent of those detained are being dosed with Prozac, and other psychoactive drugs.

Everything is designed to reinforce a regime of constant fear, punctuated by beatings, humiliation and the flagrant abuse of the prisoners' Islamic beliefs. Jamal described how the guards would often turn off the water to the cells, “so that we couldn't wash ourselves according to our religion.”

He tells of reports of other devout and non-western prisoners, unaccustomed to seeing naked women, being taunted by prostitutes brought in to the camp.

The men told of the hours of interrogation they faced at the hands of US and British intelligence agents; although intimidation, attempted entrapment and false accusation would be a more accurate description. Shafiq, Ruhal and Asif estimate they endured over 200 cross-examinations by various secret service agents from the CIA, FBI and Defence Intelligence.

Jamal said he was interrogated at least 40 times by FBI, CIA and MI5 agents, for up to 12 hours at a time, during which he was kept in tight fitting chains bolted to the floor.

He says on eight or nine occasions they tried to make him confess to being involved in terrorism. “They would say: ‘Are you a terrorist?’ I'd say ‘no, get me out of here.’”

According to Jamal, the US interrogators were much more aggressive and cruel. One threatened he would be injected with drugs if he did not cooperate.

“They were trying everything they could to frighten me. They even

staged a mock beating up in the next room to me. They started shouting and pulling a chair around, but I knew there wasn't anyone there because I couldn't hear any chains clanking on the floor."

Another agent threatened Jamal with torture to get a confession, also telling him "we will kill your family and you."

Rasul describes his first meeting with representatives of the British state in Guantanamo Bay, two days after arriving in January 2002. "I walk in and this guy says: 'I'm from the Foreign Office, I've come from the British Embassy in America, and here is one of my colleagues who's from the embassy as well.' Later he added his colleague was actually from MI5."

When Rasul asked where he was, the British officials replied, "We can't disclose that information."

While British ministers feigned concern at the conditions under which the detainees were being held, MI5 agents and civil servants connived to keep news of the men's true whereabouts from their families, and to prevent the detainees from learning what their families and solicitors in the UK were doing on their behalf.

According to Rasul, "Every time the Foreign Office came we asked about what was going on, and whether we had solicitors. His reply was 'I don't know; all I know is what's been on TV. Your case hasn't been on TV.'"

From the beginning of 2003, the interviews with the FBI, CIA and US military intelligence as well as MI5 became more frequent. Rasul explained how "They kept taking us and taking us, showing us photos saying: 'This guy says you've done this, this guy says you've done that'—what they meant was that other detainees desperate to get out were making allegations, making stuff up that they thought would help them get out of the camp."

In a move further designed to encourage false testimony, the camp authorities formalised a system of "rewards". In return for their statements, detainees could receive so-called "comfort items" such as extra clothing, utensils or books.

In summer 2003, the Tipton Three were accused of being present at a meeting with Osama bin Laden. Their US interrogators claimed they had a video showing the three men—Iqbal, Rasul and Ahmed—standing in the background during a meeting in August 2000 between bin Laden and Mohamed Atta, leader of the 9/11 hijackers.

They were all placed in solitary confinement for three months. When a senior interrogator finally arrived from Washington and played the video, Rasul protested that they looked nothing like the men in the tape, as none of them had worn beards, one of the reasons they had been so conspicuous in Afghanistan.

Crucially, when the video was shot in August 2000, Rasul was working as a sales rep for the Curry's electronics chain and had registered to attend the University of Central England: Facts that could be easily corroborated.

His interrogator ludicrously suggested that a colleague at Curry's could have faked his work records.

When he asked about his legal status, he was told by the Foreign Office man, "You should ask the MI5 guy who's coming tomorrow," only to be told by the MI5 agent the next day, "You should have asked Martin from the Foreign Office yesterday."

When he asked how long they thought he would be detained at Guantanamo, the reply was "Forever!"

After months of detention, beatings, and constant questioning, Rasul said he had "got to the point where I just couldn't take any more. He told his interrogator, "Do what you have to do, I told them. I'd been sitting there for three months in isolation, so I said 'yes, it's me. Go ahead and put me on trial.' " His two friends made similar "confessions".

Eventually, in September 2003, an MI5 agent arrived with documentary evidence showing they could not have been in Afghanistan at the time the video had been shot. "We could prove our alibi. But what about other

people, especially from countries where such records may not be available?" asks Rasul.

The American and British authorities have been unable to produce any evidence linking the five men to "acts of terrorism", a fact underscored by Home Secretary David Blunkett when he told the press prior to their release, "No one who is returned ... will actually be a threat to the security of the British people."

By releasing the men, the Bush administration is anxious to avoid the US Supreme Court hearing a federal lawsuit, launched in the name of the Tipton Three, which could well expose the illegal nature of their detention.

Before their release, they were all asked to sign a confession, admitting links with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. According to Jamal, both the American interrogators and a British diplomat asked if he would agree to sign it. "I just said 'no'. I would rather have stayed in Guantanamo than sign that paper." The Tipton Three likewise refused to sign.

The men say that those who now face a show trial in front of a military tribunal were being kept in Camp Echo, a newly built high security "jail within a jail". Inmates who have seen it describe a "white-walled, sound-absorbent hell of 24-hour solitary confinement in cells smaller than Camp Delta's, with a guard permanently stationed outside each cell door." Those imprisoned in Camp Echo include Britons Feroz Abbasi and Moazzem Begg, and Australian David Hicks.

Conditions at Guantanamo Bay are illegal under international law. The men are being detained as "enemy combatants" in a legal limbo outside US territory, and are denied the most basic human rights afforded by the Geneva Conventions governing the treatment of prisoners of war.

One Convention, to which the US and the UK are signatories, states that captured soldiers must be treated humanely. It proscribes "(a) violence to life and person, in particular, murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture; (b) taking of hostages; (c) outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment; (d) the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognised as indispensable by civilised peoples."

The lies that preceded the war against Iraq—of Saddam's huge stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction—are now exposed for all to see. As more detainees are shipped home and are able to tell their stories, so is the falsity of the claim repeated ad nausea by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that those in Guantanamo Bay "are not common criminals. They're enemy combatants and terrorists who are being detained for acts of war against our country, and that is why different rules have to apply."



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