

Father of Guantanamo Bay prisoner says son has been abused

Richard Phillips
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Australian lawyer Stephen Kenny and Terry Hicks, the father of 28-year-old David Hicks, one of two Australians incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay, have accused the US military of torturing detainees in the prison camp. The allegations were made at a press conference last week in Australia, after former British prisoners issued an open letter to the US government detailing abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

David Hicks was captured in Afghanistan by Northern Alliance forces in early December 2001 just after the Bush administration began its military attack on the country. Detained for 10 days, he was then handed over to the US military and transferred to Guantanamo Bay. Like fellow Australian Mamdouh Habib, 48, also imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay, Hicks has been held incommunicado without charge for almost two-and-a-half years.

The Howard government has actively endorsed this blatant contravention of the Geneva Conventions, declaring Hicks to be a member of Al Qaeda and claiming that his illegal detention and brutal treatment is “humane.”

Terry Hicks spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* last week, commenting on the abuse of his son and the escalating revelations about US torture of Iraqi prisoners. His remarks were made before new information came to light in the last two days about the torture of Mamdouh Habib.

Richard Phillips: Can you explain what you know about the torture of your son?

Terry Hicks: Unfortunately I can't tell you all the details because the US has only allowed Stephen Kenny to visit David and act as his lawyer in the military trial, whenever that is, on the proviso that he does not publicly reveal conditions inside Guantanamo Bay. But I can say that in 2002 David complained to the Red Cross about his treatment. The Red Cross will have reported this to US authorities and we believe that the Australian government would have been told.

We're demanding the Howard government make this information available to Stephen Kenny so that he can use it as part of David's defense case. They've told us nothing and keep saying that he is being treated well. But if he is being treated so well why don't they release the material?

Other information we've asked from the Howard government has been denied to us. The government claims that it's a

security risk to give the material to Stephen Kenny. This is ridiculous and ignores the fact that he has been already been given a security clearance by the US government.

At the moment David is in Camp Echo and has been there for 12 months. He is segregated from all other prisoners, the cells are smaller and the Camp Delta “stress and duress” methods are still used. There is no sunlight—the lights are always on—and there is constant loud music. Interrogations can take place at any time.

David's cell in Camp Delta was about seven feet by nine feet; in Camp Echo it's half or three-quarters that size, with just enough room for a bed, a sink and toilet. In Camp Delta he was able to communicate with prisoners in adjoining cells, in Camp Echo he is completely isolated. The cells are painted white and they don't see anyone, apart from their own personal guard, who stands in front of the door, and the interrogators.

RP: Late last year he was allowed to phone you. Have you been able to speak with him again?

TH: No. Major Mori [US military defense lawyer] has been trying to organize something but we haven't heard anything yet. We had a few letters and there have been some messages via Major Mori, but that's it.

RP: The Howard government maintains that David is being treated humanely in Guantanamo Bay.

TH: This is a load of rubbish. They know what's really going on there and it has nothing to do with humane treatment. If conditions are so good there then why don't Howard, Downer and some of these people get off their fat behinds and spend a couple of weeks in one of the cells? Of course they don't want to go near the place. They want to keep their eyes closed and say everything is OK.

Guantanamo Bay violates the Geneva Conventions and the Howard government is in breach of Australian law over their support for the US treatment of Australians there and should be taken to task over it. David's complaints about his treatment have fallen on deaf ears because the Howard government has no concern about basic democratic rights.

RP: Last year the Howard government blocked Freedom of Information requests for the release of correspondence between the US and Australian governments on David's detention.

TH: Yes, they've done everything possible to stop this

getting out. I believe this suppressed material tells the real story. When David was first arrested the US contacted the Australian government and told them how it would be handled. The *Australian* newspaper tried to get these documents but the government shut the doors. They've put it on the secret, secret list and no doubt want it to be locked away from public view for decades. What are they hiding? What are they afraid of?

RP: Can you comment on the US Army treatment of prisoners in Iraq? Were you shocked by these revelations?

TH: No, it didn't surprise me at all, either the treatment of prisoners or the government response. I've gone over and over this in my mind for the last two years and conditioned myself to the fact that David could be treated in this way. Obviously the US military prison system is not a place where they hand out lollies, people are going to get knocked around and you worry about it all the time.

I also wonder about Mamdouh Habib. He was picked up in Pakistan and the Americans then sent him to Egypt for interrogation before he went to Guantanamo Bay. God only knows what happened to him there. It was probably even worse than what has happened in Iraq. It's incredible this has been allowed to go on.

My biggest worry was David might end up in this sort of situation. I suppose we still really don't know because this may have already happened to him and been kept a secret. The US has been shipping people to other countries to do their torturing and interrogation for them long before Guantanamo Bay was established.

RP: The Bush administration claims that the torture and abuse is restricted to a few bad apples in the lower ranks.

TH: This is nonsense. It can't be just blamed on the guards; it's a directive from higher up. And there are hundreds of these pictures and more to come. How does this happen if it wasn't encouraged from the top?

They can talk about bad apples all they like, the problem is that the entire tree is rotten. Anyone who studies Donald Rumsfeld's history and background soon realizes that he is not a very nice person.

President Bush makes me laugh. Last week he declared that the prisoner abuse in Iraq was a terrible thing but then said that Rumsfeld, the man ultimately responsible for all this brutality, was doing a wonderful job. This would be like me shooting my wife and then being told by the prime minister that it was bad but I'm doing a great job.

At one point Rumsfeld declared it was time to take the gloves off in the war against terror. In other words, anything would be allowed. And listening to the arrested MPs, they wouldn't have enough brains to invent these tortures—they were given the go-ahead from above. They all come from poor backgrounds and have joined the army to get an income. Desperate people like this can't afford to disobey orders and get shot out of the service with no other prospects.

These methods started after General Miller went to Iraq.

Obviously there were other people in charge of the prisons in Iraq but he was sent over there to beef things up. He is an arrogant pig of man and somebody you wouldn't trust. When Curtis [Levy, filmmaker] asked him on camera about David, his reply was "ask the Australian government." He knew darn well that the Howard government was backing the US all the way and wouldn't say anything to contradict Bush.

Just think about it—if you and I kept someone in a cage for two-and-a-half years and the government found out we would jailed for it; we'd be in a cage. Yet as far as the Australian government is concerned, the White House can do it and it's OK.

RP: What's been the response to *The President versus David Hicks*, the documentary?

TH: I must admit I was a little bit worried before it came out, but the response was absolutely brilliant. There were accolades coming in from everywhere. It's been shown in Canada, where it was well received, and I believe it is screening in the US in October. Lots of people have stopped Beverly and I and explained how the film opened up their minds. They began to realise the real truth about David and have begun to think about what this all means.

RP: What's the next step in the campaign for David's release?

TH: The elections are coming up soon and unless we starting pushing harder, nothing is going to happen. We know the public have many questions about this. Lots of people are concerned about this and our support is growing all the time.

The Howard government wants to introduce laws stopping people like David writing books about their experiences. This is wrong. David had nothing to do with September 11 and other terrorist acts and if he ever returns to Australia they're depriving him of the chance to earn an income. Do they want him to go on the dole? This is straight-out censorship and reminded me of that book *Fahrenheit 451*, where the government tries to burn all literature it disagrees with.

At the end of the day, Howard, Hill, Ruddock and Downer should be facing court over what they have done. They are watching the US army hold and torture people without charge and in violation of their basic rights. The Howard government is a party to these violations of human rights and should be prosecuted.



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