

Former detainees detail abuses at Guantanamo Bay

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Earlier this month, three Britons detained for more than two years by American forces in Afghanistan and the notorious camps at Guantanamo Bay released a dossier detailing their treatment. The three, Shafiq Rasul, Rhuheh Ahmed and Asif Iqbal all from Tipton in the West Midlands, returned from Guantanamo in March and were almost immediately released without charge by the British authorities.

Entitled *Detention in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay*, the dossier makes for chilling reading. It confirms that the type of torture and degradation meted out to prisoners by US personnel at Abu Ghraib prison was not an aberration. Such depraved acts are integral to the US-led “war on terror”. They can be found at the very start of this campaign—during the occupation of Afghanistan—and were continued and refined in the camps of Guantanamo Bay and Iraq.

The dossier also makes clear the complicity of British officialdom—the Army, secret service and Foreign Office—in the maltreatment of British citizens and proves the direct responsibility of the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The dossier received little coverage in the British media.

Detention in Afghanistan

The Tipton Three’s ordeal began with their detention in Northern Afghanistan on November 28, 2001 by forces loyal to General Dostum, of the Northern Alliance. The dossier states that US forces were present as they, along with almost 200 others, were bundled into containers. Dostum’s forces fired machine gun bullets into the sides of the containers to allow some ventilation, wounding Iqbal in the arm. Throughout the 18-hour transit to Sherbegan prison, the detainees had little oxygen and no water or food. Just 20 people survived the journey; some of whom were seriously wounded.

During their 30 days imprisonment at Sherbegan, an old fortress, the three were held in tiny rooms that were hopelessly overcrowded and lacked any real sanitation. Fed on meagre rations, the prisoners—wearing only thin clothing and inadequate footwear, or none at all—were exposed to freezing December temperatures. All three soon ended up with body and hair lice and dysentery. Iqbal’s injured arm became infected, but he was given no medical treatment other than some iodine and gauze.

Having identified themselves to Red Cross personnel at the prison, the three were told that the British Embassy in Pakistan had been informed of their detention and that embassy officials would shortly visit them. Instead, on December 28, US Special Forces arrived at the prison and the three were subjected to further inhuman treatment, pain and humiliation.

Rasul, Ahmed and Iqbal were herded together with other “foreigners” at the prison’s main gate. In freezing weather they were stripped naked and photographed by American soldiers.

Later they were moved to a shed and there received their first taste of what it meant to be interrogated by the US army. Rasul explains:

“My hands and feet were tied with plastic cuffs ... soldiers forced me onto my knees in front of an American soldier in uniform. The soldier did not identify himself ... one of the soldiers who had come in with me stood in the corner of the room with a machine gun pointed at me. He said if you move that guy over there (with the gun) will shoot you.... At the end of the interview I was asked how I was feeling, and I told the interrogator that I was scared. He said that this was nothing compared with what they could do to me.”

Iqbal says that during his first interrogation, whilst cuffed and on his knees, a US soldier held a black 9mm automatic pistol to his temple.

Over the next days they were subjected to further ordeals, including being made to wait hooded and blindfolded for hours in the bitter cold whilst Special Forces soldiers periodically beat and kicked them, and made threats such as, “You killed my family in the Towers and now it’s time to get you back.” Iqbal states that he “must have been punched, kicked, slapped or struck with a rifle butt at least 30 or 40 times.”

Exhausted, dehydrated and terrified, the three were amongst a number of prisoners thrown, still hooded, into large trucks that had arrived at the prison to transport them to the airport and then on to Kandahar. During this journey, they were made to sit in awkward positions, beaten whenever they moved and subjected to constant abuse, including death threats. Flashes of light convinced them that they were being photographed as “trophies”.

On arrival in Kandahar the prisoners were bound together with a thin rope that cut deep into their arms, and dragged across the ground to a truck, scraping off the skin on their bare feet.

Still hooded and cuffed, they were taken into a tent and made to kneel with their forehead resting on the ground. When they tried to lift their heads they were kicked or beaten, or their faces were pushed into the sand and stone.

Rasul describes how each of them was then given a wristband with a number on it, stripped naked and subjected to a “forced cavity search” to further humiliate him.

Throughout this time the prisoners were not given any water or food, even though they were severely weakened by their ordeal and suffering the effects of malnutrition and dehydration.

Having given full details of their names and addresses, they were photographed and had their fingerprints and DNA taken before being given a blue jumpsuit to change into and a small quantity of crackers and peanut butter to eat.

Then the interrogations began. Conducted in English, none of the interrogators identified themselves. During his second interview with US personnel, Iqbal describes how he was severely beaten after he had denied being a member of Al Qaeda:

“He started to punch me violently and then when he knocked me to the floor started to kick me around my back and in my stomach. My face was

swollen and cut as a result of this attack.... Whilst he was attacking me, the interrogator didn't ask me any other questions but just kept swearing at me and hitting me."

Interrogations by British personnel

After a week of interrogations by US military personnel, all three were then questioned separately by a British soldier, who claimed to be from the elite Special Air Service (SAS). These interrogations were conducted in a similar fashion to those carried out by the US soldiers.

Together with the interrogation by British officers later on in Guantanamo Bay, the three men's accounts prove that the British government was well-informed of their whereabouts, and must have known of their mistreatment.

While he was being interviewed by a British officer, Rasul was handcuffed from behind and had leg irons on. One of the US soldiers placed his arm around Rasul's throat and threatened, "wait until you get back to the tent you will see what we are going to do to you."

Similarly, Ahmed says that the British officer also interrogated him for three hours, during which time a US soldier held a gun to his head and threatened to shoot him if he moved.

All three men describe how the SAS officer claimed that they were members of the British-based Islamist group, Al Muhajeroon, and said they would be detained in maximum-security prisons like Belmarsh when they got back to Britain. They all say that they were beaten, roughed up and maltreated by American soldiers after each of the interrogations by the man from the SAS.

Iqbal was interrogated three times by the SAS officer—the first time for approximately seven hours, the second for two hours and finally for about 40 minutes. During the first interrogation, the soldier told him that he would not be beaten because he was with him. At the second interrogation the SAS man said, "Your friends have confessed to being members of the Al Muhajeroon" and asked him to confess that he was a member too.

After being held in Kandahar for just short of two weeks, Rasul and Iqbal were transported to the camps of Guantanamo Bay. Ahmed was left behind in Kandahar for almost another month, during which time British security personnel from MI5 and the British Foreign Office, as well as American forces, interrogated him. He was told that Iqbal and Rasul had gone home because they had cooperated.

A few days before he was finally transported to Guantanamo, an MI5 official told Ahmed during interrogation that he had seen Ahmed's friends in Cuba and that they had confessed to "everything". If he did the same, he would also go home, he was told. Starving and afraid, Ahmed decided to admit to anything that was put to him. He "confessed" to being a member of Al Muhajeroon and that he had flown to Afghanistan to fight holy "jihad".

Ahmed explains that he "couldn't hack it": "I was in a terrible state. I just said 'OK' to everything they said to me. I agreed with everything whether it was true or not. I just wanted to get out of there."

On the day he left a British Foreign Office representative told him he was bound for Guantanamo Bay. The official was indifferent to Ahmed's state, the dossier reports, and did not give him any further information or advice.

Guantanamo Bay

During their transport to Guantanamo Bay, the prisoners were subjected to treatment even worse than at Kandahar.

Before being loaded onto planes, their clothes were cut off and their heads and beards shaven. Again they were subjected to a cavity search. Rasul says, "I was taken, still naked with a sack on my head, to another tent for a so called cavity search. I was told to bend over and then I felt something shoved up my anus. I don't know what it was but it was very painful."

They were given orange polyester uniforms of trousers and t-shirts. Then new chains were put on, consisting of ankle and handcuffs with a box between the wrists and a chain around the waist—all of which were connected with further chains. Black thermal mittens were placed on their hands and taped around the wrist. Goggles were placed on their eyes and their ears were covered with muffs. In addition, they had to wear facemasks round their nose and mouth.

"On our arrival at the Camp X-Ray somebody lifted the earmuffs I was wearing and shouted into my ear 'You are now the property of the US Marine Corps.' We were told this was our final destination," Rasul remarks.

In the dossier the three men speak of three camps at Guantanamo Bay—Camp X-Ray, Camp Delta and Camp Echo. They were not at Camp Echo, but say that prisoners there were held in total isolation so that the only people they ever spoke to were the interrogators. They know that Moazzam Begg and Feroz Abbasiare (both British citizens) were detained at Camp Echo.

Rasul, Ahmed and Iqbal were all initially held in Camp X-Ray. As described, Ahmed got there about a month later than the other two. All three were then transferred to Camp Delta in May 2002.

The treatment of the prisoners up to this point was brutal, degrading and humiliating—but one could say somewhat haphazard and arbitrary. In the camps of Guantanamo Bay, however, there was a systematic and organised regime in place that was designed to humiliate and degrade. Everything there was geared up to psychologically and physically weaken the detainees; to break them.

The prisoners were kept on a meagre diet and most of the time they could not sleep properly. Bright lights at night—the Tipton three say that the compounds were lit up like football stadiums—were only one method to deprive them of sleep. The cages, measuring two meters by two meters, were open to the elements, letting in rain and giving no protection against the hot sun. They were also open to snakes, scorpions and insects. A number of detainees were bitten by scorpions, which meant that flesh had to be dug out from the bitten limb to remove the infection. Rats also infested Camp Delta.

In the first few months, they were allowed a one-minute shower per week. Later this was increased to five minutes per week and after seven or eight months to two showers a week.

Originally at Camp X-Ray the detainees only had two towels, one blanket and a sheet, a small toothbrush, shampoo, soap, sandals and an insulation mat to sleep on. All were classed as "comfort items", which could be removed as punishment for non-cooperation.

There were two buckets, one for water, which was filled twice a day and was used to drink and wash, and one bucket to urinate in. There were toilets outside the blocks. When the prisoners needed them they had to ask a guard—who would shackle them and escort them there. Because of the shackles they were not able to clean themselves. They were also not allowed to close the door and the guards would stare at them. Often detainees could not wait for the guard or the guard would refuse to take them to the toilet and they had to use the bucket.

There was no way of keeping good personal hygiene. As a result many of the prisoners would suffer from dysentery or other diseases.

The dossier says that at any time during the detention in Guantanamo Bay, the prisoners were restricted in their religious practice. Throughout

their stay in Camp X-ray praying and the call to prayer were prevented, sometimes by brutal beatings. Originally the detainees did not get copies of the Koran and when they were given them, the guards would use them to further humiliate the prisoners by kicking them around or dropping them into the urine buckets.

The detainees were left without anything to occupy their minds. Originally they were not even allowed to talk to each other. They stayed in their cages at all times, except for interrogations and the brief time allocated for showers. Otherwise exercise consisted of a five-minute walk in a small recreation area, which was later increased to 15 minutes twice weekly.

The three also report of how they had heard of incidents of sexual provocation and molestation, although this did not happen to them personally. The three observed that the victims of such treatment were those who were most strictly brought up as Muslims: the interrogators were more interested in them.

The guards at the camps could punish and beat prisoners indiscriminately and had many ways to humiliate and degrade them, all of which they used at will. With no means to complain, the guard's behaviour went virtually unchecked. The detainees were told by Military Policemen that their superiors had told them the prisoners would try to kill them with their toothbrushes at the first opportunity and that they were all members of Al Qaeda and had killed women and children indiscriminately.

Once again, throughout this time the Tipton Three were interrogated regularly by US forces, including the CIA and FBI, as well as British personnel, generally MI5 but also on occasion Foreign Office representatives.

A number of different MI5 officials carried out interrogations on the three, lasting for between two to six hours. Although interrogations by MI5 were less brutal, the conditions were the same as with US interrogators. Still shackled, the men were sat in a chair and chained to a hoop in the middle of the floor—most of the time with armed guards present.

The British officials were fully aware of the extent of the ordeal the prisoners had to endure. Not only could they see the state the detainees were in, they were also told about everything that had happened by the prisoners. On occasions they even wrote the complaints down. Yet the MI5 interrogators took no actions on behalf of the detainees, but instead used their situation for their own ends. They threatened the prisoners that they would be sorry if they did not cooperate, that they could not expect any different treatment from the British or that they would have to stay in Guantanamo Bay for the rest of their lives. As an incentive for cooperation the prisoners were promised that they would be taken back to Britain, or put in front of a tribunal.

The British officials also interrogated other foreign nationals if they believed they had been in Britain or had any information about people in Britain.

The dossier says that the conditions at Guantanamo Bay worsened after General Geoffrey Miller arrived around the end of 2002. Miller later moved onto to Abu Ghraib prison and has been implicated in extending the torture methods used in Guantanamo Bay to Iraq. General Janice Karpinski, the commanding officer at Abu Ghraib at the time of the abuse scandal, has said that Miller told her he wanted to “Gitmo-ize” Abu Ghraib.

The three state, “It is clear to us that the military police were not free to make individual decisions at all.... We had the impression that at the beginning things were not carefully planned but a point came at which you could notice things changing.”

It was at this point that short shackling and more brutal practices were introduced. Usually prisoners were long shackled during interrogations, as previously described. The practice of short shackling forced the prisoners

to stay in an uncomfortable position for hours at a time by shackling their hands to their feet.

All three state that they were left short shackled for up to eight hours, leaving them in extreme pain with numb limbs. Other new practices introduced included deafening rock and heavy metal music being played, and the air-conditioning turned so low that it would get very cold. Beards and hair were shaved off, and people placed in cells naked. The use of isolation was also more systematically applied. Whereas before people would be left in isolation for less than a month; they began to be kept isolated for several months at a time. It was also at this point that allegations of sexual humiliation and provocation began to be reported.

A level system was introduced whereby a prisoner's treatment depended on his grading. Four was the lowest grade and meant isolation, while grade one meant a detainee could not only keep comfort items but also get a bottle of water as well. This was used to entice prisoners to cooperate and to make admissions of guilt.

As a result of the unrelenting maltreatment of the prisoners, there were several hundred suicide attempts. A high percentage of detainees are on antidepressants and the dossier reports that at least 100 have become observably mentally ill as opposed to just depressed. The report states that the behaviour of some men is “so disturbed as to show that they are no longer capable of rational thought or behaviour ... it is something that only a small child or an animal might behave like”.

What has been going at Guantanamo Bay was nothing less than systematic torture. Yet both the Blair government and the Bush administration defend the concentration camps of Guantanamo Bay because they claim that important information for “the war on terror” has come out of it. This openly condones the use of torture for political purposes. Earlier this month the court of appeals in London ruled that “evidence” obtained through torture was admissible under English law—A verdict made all the more ominous in the context of the report compiled by the Tipton Three.

For the full report see: <http://www.ccr-ny.org/v2/reports/docs/Gitmo-compositestatementFINAL23july04.pdf>



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