

# Four Britons released from Guantanamo

## Lawyer charges “savage torture” at hands of US

Niall Green  
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After being held for almost three years in the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, four United Kingdom citizens are to be released. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw announced that Moazzam Begg, from Birmingham, and Martin Mubanga, Richard Belmar and Feroz Abbasi, all from London, would return to Britain “within weeks.”

All the men were held without charge and only gained access to legal counsel in the last two months. Clive Stafford-Smith, the lawyer for Moazzam Begg and Richard Belmar, has claimed his clients witnessed and were subjected to brutal mistreatment, including physical, psychological and sexual abuse. In a letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair, he stated that while visiting Guantanamo he found “credible and consistent evidence that both men have been savagely tortured at the hands of the United States.”

These allegations are supported by evidence of torture recently obtained by the American Civil Liberties Union, which obtained through a “freedom of information” filing thousands of pieces of official correspondence referring to prisoner abuse, including internal FBI and Department of Defence memos and e-mails. According to some of these documents, there was “systematic” abuse, including beatings, choking, sleep deprivation and religious humiliation.

“On a couple of occasions I entered interview rooms to find a detainee chained hand and foot in a foetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water,” wrote an un-named FBI agent. “Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves, and had been left there for 18 to 24 hours or more.”

Stafford-Smith has drawn up a 30-page report on the torture regime endured by his clients. This report has, however, been banned from publication by the Bush administration, which claims it contains details of

“classified” interrogation techniques. Were Stafford-Smith to release this document, he could face prosecution and imprisonment should he ever visit the United States.

Colluding in Washington’s attempts to silence any honest reportage of conditions in the Guantanamo prison camp, the British government has made plain that it intends to detain the four released men immediately upon their return and subject them to “monitoring” by the police and secret service. Addressing the House of Commons, Straw said, “Once they are back in the UK, the police will consider whether to arrest them under the Terrorism Act 2000 for questioning in connection with possible terrorist activity.... I should like to assure the House that every practical step will be taken by the relevant UK authorities to maintain national security and to protect public safety.”

A US Pentagon spokesman said, “The governments of the United Kingdom and Australia [whose citizen Mamdouh Habib was also released] have accepted responsibility for these individuals and will work to prevent them from engaging in or otherwise supporting terrorist activities in the future.

“The UK and Australian governments have made a number of security assurances to the US government in this regard that was important to the transfer decision.... These detainees are enemy combatants who had been detained by the United States in accordance with the laws of war and US law.”

Given that three years of brutal US incarceration could not turn up any case against any of the men, Straw’s promise to further subject them to interrogations and police intrusions can only be understood as an attempt to discredit, intimidate and silence them. The Labour government is attempting to

avoid the embarrassment caused to it and to its American ally following the release of five British Guantanamo detainees in March of last year. Three of these men, Shafiq Rasul, Asif Iqbal and Rhuheh Ahmed, made widely publicised allegations of torture at the hands of US guards and intelligence officers.

Their 115-page report *Detention in Afghanistan and Guantanamo* listed starvation, beatings, humiliation, forced injections of unknown drugs, and exposure to extremes of heat and cold, among other flagrant breaches of international and US domestic law.

The case of Moazzam Begg provides a stark example of the travesty of international law that exists at Guantanamo and in the US-led “war on terror.” The father of three, who had moved to Afghanistan with his pregnant wife, was working in Kabul as a teacher and water supply worker when the 9/11 attacks took place. After moving to Pakistan on the outbreak of the US-led invasion, he was arrested by Pakistani security forces. While he was detained by US forces at Bagram Air Base outside Kabul, a false written confession was extracted from him after he had been tortured and witnessed the deaths of two prisoners, later officially classified as homicides. Based on this confession, he was sent to Guantanamo.

Neither he nor his counsel has been allowed to see this statement. Stafford-Smith posed the question: “What kind of civilised legal system does not allow the suspect to see his own statements? How can the prisoner’s statement be said to be classified information when, if it were true, the prisoner would already know it?”

The Blair government is concerned that the full extent of British collusion with US torture will be further exposed should the released men pursue the matter. In a letter to the Foreign Office, Stafford-Smith made the claim that Begg and Richard Belmar were both questioned by an officer of MI5, Britain’s secret security service, while they were being abused by Americans in both Afghanistan and Guantanamo. The security officer, who identified himself as Andrew, pressured the men to confess so they could return to their homes, and flatly refused their requests to see a British diplomatic representative.

Five former British residents remain held at Guantanamo, along with around 550 other prisoners from 20 other countries. The UK government has

washed its hands of them, claiming that, as they do not have citizenship, it has no responsibilities towards them.

One of the five, Basher al-Rawi, an Iraqi-born man educated in England, currently faces deportation to Iraq, where he would likely be incarcerated in the US-run Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad. His Washington-based lawyer, Brent Mickum, stated that he had made efforts to secure British government backing to free his client, only to be met with silence.

Mickum has suggested that official Bush administration policy towards “problem” Guantanamo detainees—those whose cases might be brought for review successfully before US courts—was to render them to their countries of origin. “I think people like Karl Rove [chief domestic policy adviser at the White House] have decided that this issue is hurting the administration and they want this to go away,” said Mickum. “They may also be circling the wagons to prevent any adverse legal ruling that would affect the ability of the government to place people at these ghost locations,” he added.



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