Britain: Special Branch detain documentary actors and former Guantánamo prisoners

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Two actors in a new documentary film on the US prison camp at Guantánamo Bay and two former Guantánamo prisoners were detained and interrogated by the Special Branch on February 16.

Ruhal Ahmed and Shafiq Rasul were part of the "Tipton Three" (the other was Asif Iqbal), British citizens who were held at the base in Cuba for more than two years before they were released in March of 2004. They were never charged by their American jailers with any crime. The young men were all from Tipton in the West Midlands.

Ruhal Ahmed and Shafiq Rasul were returning from the Berlin Film Festival with Rizwan Ahmed and Farhad Harun, two actors who play them in a new documentary *The Road to Guantánamo*, when they were stopped and questioned for more than an hour at London's Luton Airport.

The documentary by director Michael Winterbottom had won the prestigious Silver Bear award at the festival.

The detention of the four men was a flagrant violation of democratic rights, underscoring the extent to which Prime Minister Tony Blair's anti-terror laws are leading in the direction of a police state.

The detaining officer told the actor Rizwan Ahmed that he and the others had been stopped at immigration because anyone with "terror links" had to be questioned. But the two ex-Guantánamo prisoners have never been charged, let alone convicted, of any terrorist-related crime, and must therefore be considered, as a legal matter, to have no more "terror links" than any other person entering the country.

The fact that the actors were also detained is especially chilling, since their only "terror link" was being in the company of the two former Guantánamo prisoners. This indicates that, in the eyes of British immigration and police authorities, anyone in any way associated with those illegally detained as "enemy combatants" by the US are automatically suspect and subject to detention and interrogation—or worse.

Winterbottom's film shows how the three youths from Tipton set off for Pakistan in September 2001 to attend Iqbal's wedding and subsequently volunteered for aid work in neighbouring Afghanistan. When the US assault on Afghanistan began, the three were captured by Northern Alliance soldiers, who handed them over to American forces. They ended up at the Guantánamo prison camp.

After they were released they gave interviews detailing their torture and abuse at the hands of their American captors. Rasul explained, for example, that he was not allowed out of his cell for the first six weeks he was at the camp. He said, "There was a hook on the floor and leg irons attached to the hook, and they put your hands between your ankles on the floor and chained you to the hook on the floor as well. They'd keep you there for five hours, six hours—you couldn't go to the toilet, you'd have to urinate, defecate where you are."

Clive Stafford Smith, legal director of the human rights organisation Reprieve, denounced the detention of the four at Luton Airport. He said the Special Branch was adding "insult to injury by harassing innocent men who suffered for two long years in Guantánamo Bay before being released without charge." He added, "As if that were not enough, the Special Branch then detains the actors who portray them in a film."

According to a press report, on the arrival of the four back in Britain, Shafiq Rasul was stopped at the immigration desk. Shortly afterwards, Rizwan Ahmed (who plays Rasul in the film) was questioned by a Special Branch officer in the baggage claim area. She

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took notes of his answers and made notations from his passport. When the young actor asked why he was being questioned, he was taken to an interview room.

The officer asked to examine the contents of Rizwan Ahmed's wallet, whereupon the actor asked to speak to a lawyer. He was told that he had no right to legal advice. The officer showed him a blank form with the heading "Section 7 of the Terrorism Act Detention Form," which stated that a superintendent could order a person to be detained for up to 48 hours without any outside contact, not even with a lawyer.

The actor asked whether the officer was a superintendent, at which point he was told he was not being held under this form and would be denied access to a lawyer only for the first hour of questioning.

When the officer left the room, Ahmed used his mobile phone to call an academic lawyer friend, Ravinder Thukral. The latter then spoke to the officer directly. It was not clear whether any legal case was being made for refusing to allow Ahmed to make calls, or whether he was simply not being assisted by those holding him. Thukral contacted Reprieve, which has represented many of the Guantánamo detainees.

Before Clive Stafford Smith of Reprieve could contact Ahmed, the actor, under the threat of "continued detention," allowed the officer to go through his wallet. The officer noted down details of his bank card as well as business cards he was carrying.

The officer reportedly asked Ahmed whether he intended to make more films, and if he had become an actor to make films "to publicise the struggles of Muslims." The actor was also asked about his political views, including his attitude to the Iraq war.

Ahmed said the officer then suggested he become an informant, asking whether he would mind being contacted regularly by officers, in case he overheard people "discussing illegal activities."

At this point Stafford Smith contacted Ahmed on his mobile telephone. Under instruction, the actor told the officer that a solicitor from the office of human rights lawyer Gareth Peirce (who had represented the Tipton Three) would call in a few minutes. The officer replied that this would not be permitted, and called in a male colleague who took Ahmed's telephone and proceeded to examine the numbers stored in the phone's memory.

A third officer then entered the room, and Ahmed was threatened with being taken to a police station. Ahmed said that the officer with his telephone called him a "f**ker" and, when he objected, accused him of "making things up." Ahmed demanded he be allowed to call Gareth Peirce's office.

The female officer granted this, but warned Ahmed that if he asked about anything other than his right of legal access, the telephone would be taken away from him. As soon as he got through to the lawyer's office, those holding him told him he was free to go. The officer said he was prolonging his own detention by insisting on talking to lawyers.

Ahmed was denied both the names of the interviewing officers and copies of any notes from the interview. He was, however, handed a search record sheet, which stated that the purpose of the detention was "intelligence." The second page of the record sheet, under the heading "Officers Must Also Complete," was blank.

Afterwards, Ahmed described the incident as "humiliating" and "intimidating," and expressed concern that "being tagged as some kind of political activist" could jeopardise his employment prospects.

Clive Stafford Smith condemned Ahmed's detention as "patently illegal when it happened." He warned that under recent legislation passed by the Blair government against "glorifying" acts of terrorism, an actor involved in a production that put an opposing side of the story to the official government line could well face the threat of detention.

"Who's next?" he asked. "Is Ken Stott going to be detained because he played... Adolf Hitler?"

The Road to Guantánamo will be shown on British television on March 9.

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