

# Transcripts of Guantánamo hearings: a window into Washington's gulag

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The Associated Press published on March 15 its preliminary analysis of thousands of pages of documents on prisoners held by the US at Guantánamo Bay. The analysis gives a glimpse into the lives of hundreds of people who have been arbitrarily swept up and held without cause for years, subjected to abuse and wretched conditions.

The documents were released by the Defense Department on March 3, following a judicial order. The AP had filed a lawsuit against the Defense Department seeking release of the documents. More than 5,000 pages were handed over, consisting mainly of partial transcripts of the Combatant Status Review Tribunals, kangaroo courts in which prisoners have sought to challenge their status as “enemy combatants.” However, the documents were not organized or indexed, and the AP has taken two weeks to put together a list of 186 names of prisoners.

These names represent only a fraction of those who have been held at the prison in Cuba, all of them deprived of basic democratic rights. According to the AP, more than 600 individuals held at Guantánamo Bay are not mentioned in the transcripts. However, this is the first time that anything approaching a list of prisoners—and their backgrounds—has been made available to the public.

Most of the 186 prisoners in the transcripts are Afghan, though many come from other countries throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, and some are from Europe. They were mostly picked up as part of the American invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. During the illegal invasion, the US military and its allies rounded up thousands of people, some with some relationship to the Taliban or the resistance to the American invasion, some arrested by accident or association.

A number of the prisoners said they were turned over to the American authorities because they refused to pay a bribe to the new government installed by Washington. Others said they were turned over to US troops for political reasons, because they had come into conflict with some other government officials following the invasion.

Many of the prisoners transferred to Guantánamo Bay first passed through US-controlled detention facilities at Bagram air base, or through other countries such as Pakistan, where they were routinely tortured. In the transcripts, many complain that they have no idea why they are being held and have not been shown any of the evidence against them. Transcripts of the hearings in which this secret evidence was presented were not included in the material released by the military. One prisoner noted during his hearing, “In our culture, if someone is accused of something, they are shown the evidence.”

Among those arrested and held in Guantánamo Bay are:

\* Abdullah Khan, an Afghan shopkeeper. Like a number of the prisoners, he says that he was falsely identified as a Taliban official. “Americans were giving an announcement that if you turn over a high-ranking Taliban member or the governor, we will give you a lot of money,” he said. “I have very small kids and I don’t know what my kids are doing.” Khan passed a polygraph test given to verify his claims.

\* Abdul Matin was arrested after he returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan following the US invasion. According to the transcripts, he said he was a science teacher and was not a supporter of al Qaeda or the Taliban, but that he was turned over after refusing to pay the government a bribe. The AP notes that he successfully answered a number of questions

demonstrating a knowledge of science and mathematics.

\* Abdul Rahman, who also passed a polygraph test, said he was a shop owner. According to the AP, “Rahman said after the US bombing began, he and other merchants were detained by Abdul Rashid Dostum, now the Afghan army’s chief of staff. ‘They tied us up, and we stayed there for a night without food or water,’ he said. ‘I think they buried about 50 people alive into the ground. They kept on shouting and screaming, and they kept putting dirt on them.’ ” During the US invasion, Dostum, a local warlord, was an important US ally and part of the Northern Alliance. It was Dostum’s forces that were responsible for the massacre at Mazar-i-Sharif, when up to 1,000 prisoners were suffocated in sealed cargo containers.

\* Dawd Gul, who says he raised sheep, but was forcefully drafted by the Taliban. According to the AP, “After he told the Taliban he did not know how to use a Kalashnikov, they gave him a job peeling potatoes, washing dishes and serving food.”

\* The AP recounts the following Kafkaesque exchange between members of the American tribunal and Mohammed Sharif, an Afghan accused of being a guard at a Taliban camp. “Q: You mentioned that if we had facts or proof against you, you would understand why you were a prisoner, is that correct?” A: “Yes.” Q: “What could you have possibly done, that we might discover some of those facts?” A: “That’s my point. There are no facts.... This is ridiculous. I know for a fact there is no proof.”

\* Abdur Sayed Rahman, a citizen of Pakistan, said that he was mistaken for Abdur Zahid Rahman, a deputy minister of the Taliban government. Rahman said that he was unable to pay a bribe to free himself once he was arrested. “An American told me I was wrongfully taken and that in a couple of days I’d be freed. I never saw that American again and I’m still here.”

The documents go on like this—186 people with similar stories. All of the prisoners at Guantánamo are being held illegally, captured in the course of an aggressive war aimed to assert American control over critical resources in Central Asia. They are being held in flagrant violation of the Geneva Conventions and all standards of international law. The fact that many of these prisoners appear to have had absolutely nothing

to do with the conflict is nevertheless particularly outrageous.

Also this week, the lawyer for a man currently held at Guantánamo Bay, Jumah al-Doussari, released a letter written in October 2005, just before al-Doussari attempted to kill himself. The letter was only cleared for release recently by the American government, which vets all communications from prisoners. Al-Doussari’s letter provides a portrait of the desperation of many of the prisoners at the camp, who have no idea why they are being held and when they might be released, and are prevented from having contact with their families. Al-Doussari has attempted suicide on multiple occasions.

“The detainees,” he wrote, according to a translation, “are suffering from the bitterness of despair, the detention humiliation and the vanquish of slavery and suppression.” Directing his comments to his lawyer, he wrote, “I hope you will always remember that you met and sat with a ‘human being’ called ‘Jumah’ who suffered too much and was abused in his belief, self, dignity and also in his humanity. He was imprisoned, tortured and deprived from his homeland, his family and his young daughter who is in the most need of him for four years...with no reason or crime committed.”

Al-Doussari wrote that suicide would be the way to “make our voice heard by the world from the depths of the detention centers” and called for the “fair people of America to look again at the situation and try to have a moment of truth with themselves.... When you remember me in my last gasps of life before dying, while my soul is leaving my body to rise to its creator, remember that the world let us and our case down. Remember that our governments let us down.”

Hundreds of people at Guantánamo Bay are being held under the same conditions, he wrote. They “were captured, tortured and detained for no offence or reason. Their lives might end like mine.”



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