

Hunger strike by detainees at “Canada’s Guantánamo”

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Three individuals detained under a Canadian government “national security certificate”—Mahmoud Jaballah, Mohammad Mahjoub and Hassan Almrei—are mounting a hunger strike to protest against the inhumane conditions under which they are being held at a maximum security prison in Kingston, Ontario. At the time of writing, Mahjoub is in his 38th day of hunger strike, while Almrei and Jaballah are in their 17th day.

This is the second time that a hunger strike has been waged in protest against the brutal treatment of security certificate detainees. Almrei was also involved in the first hunger strike, and almost died during its 65 days.

A security certificate is a ministerial decree authorizing—on the basis of secret evidence—the arrest, indefinite detention, and deportation of non-citizens deemed by the government to be threats to Canada’s national security. (See “Canada’s anti-democratic ‘national security certificates’ and the impotence of official liberalism”)

The Canadian government had a \$3.2 million isolation unit specially constructed at Kingston’s Milhaven prison in order to hold security certificate detainees. The “Kingston Immigration Holding Centre (KIHC)” has been dubbed “Guantánamo North” in reference to the US concentration camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. From the standpoint of democratic rights, the reference is not an exaggeration. Like Guantánamo, those detained do not know why they are there, nor for how long they will be incarcerated, and are denied the basic amenities accorded even those convicted of the most heinous crimes.

The conditions of detention for Jaballah, Mahjoub and Almrei are particularly difficult on account of the legal limbo into which they have been placed.

They are not serving a sentence, which might permit

them to regain their liberty, and they are unable to benefit, in the meantime, from the various programs offered by the penitentiary, such as those allowing inmates to work, to have access to a library, to see their spouses, to exercise, and so on.

They are in the nightmarish situation of being detained indefinitely because they supposedly pose a threat to national security and face the risk of being deported at any moment to their countries of origin, where they could face torture and death. Moreover, they and their lawyers are unable to answer the government’s claims that they have terrorist connections because the state refuses to disclose the evidence against them.

The efforts of the Solicitor General to deport them recently faced a setback when, on December 14, the Federal Court concluded that an assessment by the Minister of Immigration, minimizing the risk that Mahjoub would face torture were he deported to Egypt, was manifestly unsound.

The demands of the hunger strikers are contained in a communication released by the Justice for Adil Charkaoui Coalition. One of the most urgent relates to the health of Mahjoub. The hunger strikers are demanding that Mr. Mahjoub be “immediately able to receive medical treatment for his hepatitis C and high blood pressure”—treatment that “has been denied to him since September.”

Other demands put forward by the hunger strikers include (i) access to the media; (ii) the nomination of a neutral mediator and the presence of a translator when complaints are made; (iii) a stop to daily searches—a procedure whose only aim is humiliation given that three men are under constant surveillance; (iv) the right to use calling cards in order to speak to their family abroad; (v) access to a library, education programs, and

family visits; (vi) and the right to leave their cells before dawn in order to wash and pray as their religious beliefs require.



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