

Britain: Guantánamo detainee details years of torture

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A British resident, Omar Deghayes, detained at Guantánamo Bay as an alleged terrorist, reports that he has suffered years of torture, sexual abuse and death threats. Last week, Omar's family released a dossier documenting his terrible ordeal, which he dictated to a lawyer visiting the United States-run military prison.

Deghayes, a lawyer, aged 37 and married with a five-year-old son, has been incarcerated at Guantánamo Bay for years with four other British residents—Saudi Arabian-born Shaker Aamer, Jordanian Jamil el Banna, Ethiopian Binyam Mohamed and Algerian Abdennour Sameur. In addition to their physical and mental ordeals, all have found themselves in a Catch 22 nightmare. Although granted refugee status, indefinite leave or exceptional leave to remain in the UK because of threats of mistreatment in their own countries, the Labour government ignored pleas to press for their release from detention on the grounds that they were not UK citizens. At the same time, the US administration refused to negotiate their release with the countries of their birth.

Omar's family was granted political asylum in the UK following the arrest and execution in 1980 of his father, a Libyan trade union leader and political opponent of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. He grew up in Brighton and studied law in the UK in the hope of becoming a human rights lawyer. Although the rest of his family are British citizens, Omar missed an interview because he was abroad and still has a Libyan passport, which means the Gaddafi regime is legally responsible for making diplomatic representations on his behalf.

In 2001, Omar decided to look for work abroad, ending up in Afghanistan where he started a business exporting dried fruit, married his wife and had a son. When the US invaded Afghanistan, the family attempted to return to the UK via Pakistan, but were arrested in Lahore in April 2002, reportedly for a bounty of US\$5,000.

In Pakistan, Omar says he was told the US had ordered

his detention. Guards subjected him to “systematic beatings,” threatened to leave him in a room full of snakes and submerged him under water until he thought he was going to drown. Faced with electric shock treatment, Omar explains, “The more I scream they will laugh and do it again...my screams all in vain.”

Omar was returned to Afghanistan and the US-run prison at Bagram air base, which he likened to “Nazi camps that I saw in films.” When asked by his lawyer about his treatment, Omar replied, “Of course, beating and torture is considered normal [there].”

His captors subjected him to forced nudity, deprived him of food for 45 days and locked him in a box with very little air for long periods. British intelligence agents are reported to have interrogated Omar up to seven times while he was in Bagram.

Omar claims the “guards forced petrol and benzene up the anuses of prisoners. This would burn horribly.” He said guards issued death threats and that he witnessed them shoot one prisoner who tried to help a detainee being abused and then beat another one to death.

“One by the name of Abdaulmalik, Moroccan and Italian, was beaten until I heard no sound of him after the screaming.

“There was afterwards panic in prison and the guards running about in fear saying to each other the Arab has died. I have not seen this young man again.”

Omar claims another detainee was beaten to a bloody pulp, leaving him “paralysed and mentally damaged.”

US authorities transferred Omar to Guantánamo Bay in September 2002, where he alleges he was beaten on his first day. He says guards sexually assaulted him and other detainees during a strip search. And when he challenged them he was repeatedly pepper-sprayed. One guard forced his finger into one of Omar's eyes, blinding him.

After an eight-month period of solitary confinement, Libyan intelligence agents interrogated Omar in

September 2004 and threatened him with violence and death. One allegedly said, “You will be brought to judgement in Libya. In here I cannot do anything but if I meet you [later] I will kill you.”

Omar claims his captors said he would not receive a proper trial and faced execution. He says, “Many times one FBI interrogator by the name of Craig said, ‘Omar, it is nothing like the law you studied in the UK. There will never be a proper court and lawyers, etcetera, it would be only a military tribunal to determine your future and your life. Your best choice is to cooperate with me.’”

Omar’s family protest his innocence and are campaigning for his release. His brother Abubaker says, “I cannot believe how the Americans can do this to him, and astonished how he could survive this.” His mother, Zohra Zewawi, added, “I worry that something has happened to his mind. He is being tortured. I read his diary. When he gets out I fear he will not be normal Omar. I’m sure he will have changed.”

They say that although Omar’s name is on the FBI’s Most Wanted list, the accompanying picture taken from a training video of a Chechen separatist group looks nothing like him, a view supported by facial recognition experts.

Three Britons—Asef Iqbal, Ruhai Ahmed and Shafiq Rasul—held for two years in Guantánamo Bay, and who published a 115-page dossier accusing the US of carrying out mental and physical torture, were flown back to the UK in March 2004 and freed without charge.

In a similar development last week, Sandy Hodgkinson, US deputy assistant secretary of defence for detainee affairs, said that although the inmates were “still considered to be of a significant threat,” the US government would not insist on their arrest and imprisonment in Britain as a condition for transfer.

Hodgkinson’s statement was prompted by a formal request sent by British Foreign Secretary David Miliband to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asking for the release of the British residents. He claimed the UK government had changed its mind because of recent steps taken by the US government to reduce the numbers of those detained at the camp, initiate a “move towards” its closure and “include an increasing emphasis on engagement with third countries over the transfer and resettlement of those detained.”

Clive Stafford Smith, a lawyer who represents the five men, greeted the UK government’s decision to ask for the detainee’s release, stating, “This is good news for everyone, even George Bush. For all his statements about

wanting to close Guantanamo, he can’t if it’s chock-a-block. The Europeans have been pretty pious in their criticism, but done nothing to help close it until now. This is a remarkable turn for the British government.”

The “remarkable turn” is not based on a change of conscience by Tony Blair’s successor, Gordon Brown, a sudden discovery of democratic principles as the media proclaims.

For one thing, the High Court had instructed the Home Office to decide by last week whether one of the five detainees, Jamil el Banna, would be allowed to return to live in the UK after his release.

More importantly, after the lies used to launch the Iraq war, and the systematic undermining of civil liberties in the name of the war on terror under Blair, Brown has come to office lacking any popular support.

In addition, there is mounting international condemnation of Guantánamo Bay and its violation of the US constitution and international law. A report released in April by Amnesty International describes “deteriorating” conditions at the prison camp and called for its immediate closure of the camp and the right of victims to pursue reparations in US courts.

In an affidavit submitted to the US Supreme Court in June, Army reserve officer Stephen Abraham became the first officer to openly criticise the Guantánamo Bay military tribunals where he served as a panel member. Abraham’s affidavit provides first-hand evidence that the tribunals are a travesty of justice in which personnel are poorly trained, information is withheld or misused and panel members are pressured to declare detainees guilty of being “enemy combatants.”



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