

Guantanamo documents reveal US brutality and lawlessness

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A new trove of documents released Sunday night by WikiLeaks profiles more than 700 prisoners who passed through the Guantanamo Bay detention camp between 2002 and 2009. The documents demonstrate that, even in the eyes of the US military/intelligence apparatus, there was no evidence connecting the vast majority of the prisoners to any form of terrorism, let alone terrorist threats against the United States and US citizens.

The documents consist largely of Detainee Assessment Briefs (DABs), short summaries of the alleged evidence against individual detainees, as well as accounts of their physical and mental health, how they came into US custody, their value as intelligence sources and their eventual disposition, if any. Along with the DABs on 704 prisoners—out of 779 men believed to have been imprisoned at Guantanamo for any length of time—there are documents providing guidelines for interrogators and other procedures at the US-run prison camp in Cuba.

The documents require careful review, but certain preliminary conclusions can be drawn immediately from the digests which have appeared in a dozen newspapers and magazines, some of which are collaborating with WikiLeaks and others which are openly hostile to the whistle-blower web site. There is also a useful summary posted on WikiLeaks itself (<http://wikileaks.ch/gitmo/>).

Few of the DABs contain any detail on the interrogation techniques practiced by US torturers at CIA “black prisons,” before the victims arrived at Guantanamo, or at Guantanamo itself. But there are several references to torture, without using that word, perpetrated by US allies on a contract basis. Thus, Australian prisoner Mamdouh Habib is described as having undergone “severe duress” at an Egyptian prison before he was sent to Guantanamo. During those interrogations, he made the absurd claim to having personally trained in martial arts six of the 19 terrorists who perpetrated the September 11, 2001 attacks.

While the top officials of the Bush administration repeatedly described the Guantanamo Bay prisoners as “the worst of the worst,” the most hardened Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists who deserved the most severe treatment, the description of the prisoners in the DABs is far different.

Of the nearly 800 prisoners, some 150 were regarded as clearly innocent, even by the loose standards applied by the US counterterrorism apparatus. Many of these prisoners were held for months, even years, after US interrogators had concluded they had no connection to terrorism. At least 100 prisoners were diagnosed as suffering from psychiatric disorders, including psychosis, depression and bipolarity.

Another 380 were considered low-level employees and foot soldiers, including many Taliban conscripts. Since the Taliban ruled

Afghanistan for seven years, anyone who worked for the government or the military was thereby “linked” to the Taliban in this way, creating a vast pool of potential detainees.

Ultimately, 204 of the 223 Afghan citizens detained at Guantanamo were repatriated, and nearly all of those were released from custody as soon as they arrived home. Half of the Afghan detainees, and most of the Pakistanis, are believed to have been “sold” to the US in return for bounties collected by Afghan militia warlords and Pakistani police officials.

All but 14 of the 135 Saudi nationals detained at Guantanamo, the second largest group of prisoners, have been repatriated. Nearly all the Yemeni nationals, the third largest group of detainees, have been cleared of any involvement in terrorism, but many remain at Guantanamo because the US stooge regime in Yemen has been reluctant to take them.

The Obama administration has kept Guantanamo open for more than two years, despite Obama’s election campaign promise to close it and the executive order he signed as soon as he took office. Some 172 prisoners remain, including 40 that even the US intelligence agencies acknowledge are innocent, most of them Yemenis. Only about 40 are expected to face trial, mainly by military commission, while the largest group consists of those to be detained indefinitely but never tried, either because the evidence against them is based on torture and cannot be used in any judicial proceeding or because the evidence is insufficient to sustain any prosecution.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the detentions, as demonstrated in the DABs, is the sheer arbitrariness of the long-term incarcerations of hundreds of men. The detained range in age (at detention) from a 14-year-old who was thought to know some local Taliban leaders (a description that would apply to most youth in the east and south of Afghanistan), to an 89-year-old suffering from senile dementia, cancer and other serious illnesses.

Two former prisoners of the Taliban were detained because they could describe the group’s interrogation techniques. Two former draftees were asked for information on Taliban conscription techniques. A taxi driver in the Khost/Kabul area was interrogated about possible Taliban escape routes. A peasant farmer was questioned about the topography of his native district, including possible Al Qaeda infiltration routes.

The flimsiness of the charges against most of the Guantanamo prisoners is underscored by the frequent use of allegations produced by torture or generated from a handful of prisoners who cooperated with their interrogators by making outlandish and unsupported charges against many of their fellow detainees.

As many as 135 prisoners have notations in their DABs about

testimony against them by a single Yemeni prisoner, Yasim Basardah, whose evidence was ultimately dismissed by several judges. By August 2008, Basardah had become so discredited that Navy Rear Adm. Dave Thomas, the prison camp commander, warned, “Any information provided should be adequately verified through other sources before being utilized.” Basardah was released from Guantanamo in 2009 and reportedly lives in Spain.

Another 100 dossiers feature the inventions of Abu Zubaydah, once described by US officials as the third-ranking figure in Al Qaeda, now believed to be a low-level personal aide or car pool driver. Abu Zubaydah was waterboarded at least 83 times and responded with increasingly farfetched accounts of an Al Qaeda plan to develop a hydrogen bomb or a radioactive “dirty bomb.”

One British resident, Libyan immigrant Omar Deghayes, was described on one page of his DAB as having been arrested in Pakistan in late 2001, and on the following page as “arrested in Spain in November 2001 for extremist activities and links to an Al Qaida cell based in Spain.” According to the account in the *Guardian*, there was no attempt to reconcile the two diametrically opposed reports. Instead, both were cited as reasons for detaining Deghayes at Guantanamo: “The former is given as a reason for sending him to Guantánamo and the latter as a reason for keeping him there,” the newspaper wrote.

One Pakistani man and his brother were arrested and turned over to US forces, then transferred to Guantanamo, despite the fact that the two had been working on a book to combat Islamic extremism, in the course of which they had come into contact with several Islamists and come to the notice of the Pakistani authorities.

According to his DAB, Abdul Badr Mannan “in his writings, has also been extremely critical of the Pakistani intelligence service and their overt connections to extremism and Al Qaida. Detainee and his brother may have been arrested on that pretence and turned over to US authorities, who were misled as to the detainee’s affiliations.”

A Muslim convert of British descent, Jamal al-Harith, was arrested by the Taliban as a suspected British spy, then seized by US forces and “beaten, stripped naked and interrogated.” He was interrogated about 80 times by US and British security officials, according to his own account. His DAB quotes Guantanamo Commander Michael Dunlavey making the assessment in September 2002 “that detainee was not affiliated with Al Qaida or a Taliban leader.” Nonetheless, he remained in the prison another year.

One of the documents released by WikiLeaks is a 17-page “JTF-GTMO matrix of threat indicators,” which gives guidance to interrogators about what criteria to use in assessing the potential dangers posed by a detainee. These include membership in any of nine mosques in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Europe; possession of a Casio F91W watch (widely available for purchase worldwide); travel to Afghanistan any time after September 11, 2001, regardless of the reason; connections, however distant, to any of several dozen purported “terrorist” organizations including, remarkably, the main Pakistani intelligence agency ISI.

Raw material in the DABs includes testimony from prisoners about ISI officers meeting with Taliban leaders, providing funds and weapons for the Taliban, and giving advice on military tactics and coordination to both Taliban and Al Qaeda between 2002 and 2008. Some elements of the ISI allegedly provided “sniper training and the use of remote control improvised explosive devices.”

At the same time, the documents confirm that interrogators from dozens of foreign intelligence agencies traveled to Guantanamo to help interrogate prisoners of their nationality. Besides nearly all the

countries of Western Europe, as well as Canada and Australia, this included Saudi Arabia, China, Tunisia, Morocco, Russia, Tajikistan, Jordan, Algeria, Yemen and Kuwait—all of them known to practice torture at home, making them comfortable operating at Guantanamo. It also included officers of the Pakistani ISI, the same agency described as a terrorist group in the threat matrix document.

One of the most sinister detentions was the six years of imprisonment for an Al Jazeera cameraman, Sami al-Hajj, arrested in Pakistan and shipped to Guantanamo after 9/11. His DAB declares that one reason for his detention was “to provide information on...the Al Jazeera news network’s training program, telecommunications equipment, and newsgathering operations in Chechnya, Kosovo and Afghanistan, including the network’s acquisition of a video of UBL [Osama bin Laden] and a subsequent interview with UBL.”

Al-Hajj’s British attorney, Clive Stafford Smith, said that the Guantanamo interrogations focused almost exclusively on the television network’s operations, and al-Hajj was never questioned about his own supposed role in Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Stafford Smith told the press that he believed the US wanted to recruit al-Hajj as an informer at the network. He was released in May 2008 and has returned to work at Al Jazeera.

According to the summary posted by WikiLeaks, “the entire edifice constructed by the government is fundamentally unsound, and that what the Guantánamo Files reveal, primarily, is that only a few dozen prisoners are genuinely accused of involvement in terrorism.”

The web site wrote that the documents did not confirm the “scaremongering rhetoric” of the US government, but “the opposite: the anatomy of a colossal crime perpetrated by the US government on 779 prisoners who, for the most part, are not and never have been the terrorists the government would like us to believe they are.”

WikiLeaks made the material available to news organizations in the United States, Britain, France, Spain and Germany, as it has in the past. It excluded, however, the *New York Times* and the British *Guardian*, which were once its major outlets, because of the overt editorial hostility of both publications.

In the latest release, the *Times* reported that it had obtained the Guantanamo DABs independently, and not from WikiLeaks, and made them available to the *Guardian* and National Public Radio in the United States.

The *Times* did not identify its source, but since the DABs are all secret US intelligence documents marked “NOFORN”—i.e., not for distribution to any foreign government or intelligence service—it appears likely that the *Times* received its own version of the DABs from the US government itself.

The presentation in the *Times* is also markedly different from that which appears in the international press. Newspapers overseas have emphasized the arbitrary, even random character of the detentions, and the innocence of the vast majority of detainees. The *Times* gave equal play to Pentagon claims that about one quarter of those released from Guantanamo have “returned” to terrorism—although this figure includes prisoners who after their release became public political opponents of US torture and military aggression, not terrorists.



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