Former Guantanamo detainee David Hicks speaks with the World Socialist Web Site

Richard Phillips
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In late 2001, Australian citizen David Hicks, 26, was captured in Afghanistan and subjected to beatings, death threats and other forms of abuse by American authorities. In January 2002, he was transported to Guantanamo where he was illegally held for over five years as an alleged terrorist, most of it in solitary confinement.

Hicks was finally repatriated to Australia in May 2007 after he accepted a back-room plea deal orchestrated by the then Australian government of Prime Minister John Howard and the Bush administration. Hicks was given an offer he could not refuse—plead guilty to "providing material support to terrorism" or spend the rest of his life in the Guantanamo Bay hell hole.

In October 2010 Hicks wrote Guantanamo: My Journey *detailing his ordeal (see* WSWS review*). A month earlier, he lodged a formal complaint to the United Nations Human Rights Committee over Canberra's refusal to secure his release from Guantanamo. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Australian government was obliged to make an official response within six months. It has still not done so.*

In July this year the federal Labor government initiated legal action aimed at seizing Hicks's earnings from Guantanamo: My Journey. *While Hicks cannot comment on this case, he recently spoke with the* World Socialist Web Site *about his incarceration in Guantanamo and his ongoing demonisation by the Australian media.*

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Richard Phillips: Can you comment on how the mainstream media has responded to your book? None of the reviews seriously explore the crimes committed against you in Afghanistan and Guantanamo.

David Hicks: The media has mostly attacked my character, demonising me and going on and on about whether I am guilty or not. They're just not interested in the important questions and how Australian citizens can be abandoned.

Julian Assange is a classic example of someone who might end up in the US hands and who will no doubt be treated unfairly. He could become the next political football for the Australian government, and if it's not him it'll be someone else, it's only a matter of time.

It's important that people are clear on the main issues: that the law was denied to me and it was politicians who kept me incarcerated, and politicians who set up the so-called plea deal, under the guise of a legal arrangement. I felt like a political prisoner in Guantanamo and I still feel like a political football.

RP: Former Attorney General Phillip Ruddock declared that the Australian government had no responsibility to protect you or demand your release. How would you answer this?

DH: My understanding of the law is that if an Australian citizen alleges that he's being tortured then the government must investigate. They never did in my case. This was despite the Abu Ghraib scandal in Iraq and all the photographic evidence of torture.

The Howard government simply relied on US defense department investigations, which were whitewashes, and claimed I'd never been tortured. Julia Gillard has recently stated there's no need for an independent investigation into my treatment because it was investigated by the American defense department in 2004.

Australian consular officials came to see me in Guantanamo, but not until after I'd been there for years. I told them everything—the beatings and the serious, ongoing psychological stuff and other stuff. I also complained about my back because it was deteriorating badly. It wasn't just from the stress positions or being kicked in the back many times—but connected to the way I was being held in isolation without exercise for years. I hoped they'd do something to stop it from getting worse. They did nothing and it's now badly damaged.

RP: Former Australian foreign minister Downer claimed there was no evidence you'd been tortured.

DH: One report said that I'd received some rough handling but had misinterpreted it. Ruddock was also questioned about sleep deprivation while I was in Guantanamo and claimed it wasn't torture. This gives you some idea of how they treated these issues.

But it's not a question of whether you believe me. The amount of evidence has been overwhelming, from America's own documentation and what's been called the "Torture Papers", as well as statements from FBI and CIA whistleblowers disturbed by what they saw. This means the media and US and Australian politicians have to prove that I wasn't tortured. They have to explain why the 700 or so other detainees in Guantanamo were tortured but I wasn't.

RP: You dropped out of school in the late 1990s before getting a job in Japan as a horse trainer. During this time you saw NATO spokesman Jamie O'Shea on television calling for support for the Kosovo Liberation Army. Why did you get involved?

DH: I had no interest in politics but had already set myself the most outlandish, biggest, craziest goal I could. My plan was to get some money together in Japan and then travel the Old Silk Road by horse. I didn't know whether I'd start at the Himalayan end or in Turkey but I'd mentally prepared myself to take this big step into the unknown.

That was my mindset when I saw Jamie Shea's television briefings. There was footage of refugees and terrible stories of injustice. Something clicked and I just jumped into the deep end. The KLA were endorsed by NATO and so I bought a one-way ticket to Tirana, the capital of Albania. My plan was to get a hotel and go on the streets everyday and hopefully find the KLA before my money ran out.

I rang a few friends and my family who all thought I was mad but somehow it all fell into place and within days I found myself in a KLA

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training camp. It was bizarre but I didn't really think about consequences. I had this arrogant expectation about my destiny—that if I jumped destiny would just catch me.

RP: The KLA were not freedom fighters but were doing NATO's bidding. They were being cultivated by the US and Europe to advance their geo-strategic interests and that's why it was easy for you to get into the country and find the KLA. As the saying goes—one day a freedom fighter, the next a terrorist. The labels switched according to the aims of the imperialist powers.

DH: I admit that I made a lot of mistakes and I guess I'm older and wiser now but my biggest mistake was to believe that military intervention was the way to deal with the problems I saw in Kosovo and other places.

In many ways I blame television and the media, and the political messages constantly sent out that military intervention can solve these problems. And these messages are as strong as ever. Every day we see politicians on television telling us that their wars are for freedom, democracy and to defend the people and using this to justify bombing the hell out of various countries. So I don't think it should be regarded as unusual for a young Adelaide man, or someone from anywhere really, to think that military methods will solve oppression and other problems.

I've spoken on Skype to a former Guantanamo detainee from Britain who was recently in Libya and came across someone who'd been in Guantanamo with us and interviewed him. The guy had an AK-47 on his back and was fighting with the so-called rebels. The British guy said, "You've been in Gitmo and I'm sure you don't see America as your friend but now you're fighting for them." He replied, "I don't care, they're helping us in our struggle and we accept that." The person I was speaking to on Skype was stunned. "What a bizarre, strange world we live in," he said.

RP: The assault on Libya, like all the other imperialist interventions, was justified by so-called humanitarian concerns but like the invasion of Iraq was about oil.

DH: Yes. I've always thought that it's hypocritical for the media and others to criticise me when they support the bombing of Libya and Gaddaffi's government and all the other regimes the US doesn't agree with. Australia is not in Libya with the military but the government is supporting this attack in every other way. I'm also very disturbed that Obama has given the green light for the CIA to go into non-combat zones and assassinate government officials and others it doesn't agree with.

RP: It's now been revealed that there was a unit inside Guantanamo for children. Were you aware of it?

DH: Yes, I heard about it from the guards. It was called Camp Iguana and held children from 8- to 14-years-old. One of the human rights agencies has since reported that an interrogation method used by the CIA on the children was to put them in a coffin-sized box with non-lethal insects. They would discover what sort of insects the children were most afraid of and then custom design a torture.

When someone from the CIA was asked whether this was true, he not only confirmed it but claimed no harm was done because professional mental health experts were there 24 hours a day and could attend to the children's needs. This is disgusting and really hard to comprehend.

RP: One of the most chilling parts of your book is your description of the camp containing people who had been completely broken.

DH: It was a block within Camp Delta. Everyone has a different level of strength or resistance but there were people who didn't handle the situation very well and offered to do anything to help the interrogators. They would go to great extremes to show that they weren't Muslims—they'd ask for pornographic magazines or ask to eat pork and things like that.

The guards and interrogators would pretend that they liked them while at the same time subjecting them to bizarre, psychological manipulation and even placed them alongside the more religious prisoners. In the end these people were pushed too far, to the point where they developed really serious mental health issues. After the interrogators had no more use for them they were put in the so-called Crazy Block. Some of these people were so destroyed that they'd eat their own faeces, openly masturbate and do other totally disoriented things. The guards encouraged this while giving them Prozac and other stuff.

We could hear all these weird goings-on and it was bloody scary. You're sitting in Guantanamo, and living this horror story, and in the shipping container next door you'd hear bizarre noises—donkey, monkey and other animal noises and strange metal rhythms—that sounded like a big, crazy party. It was really frightening because these were people who were like us when they first arrived in Guantanamo. This is what the interrogators did to them and you knew it could be you.

RP: You write that you contemplated suicide but were also able to strike up a relationship with a couple of guards. Did this give you any hope?

DH: It gave me a little bit of strength but no real hope for release or for justice. I spent about 18 months in Camp Echo without seeing the sun and most of the human contact I had was hostile and really horrible so it made a difference when every now and again one of the guards would have a normal chat about every day things.

I didn't want to just write about the bad things in the book—there was plenty of that—but to recognise those people who risked punishment, and even jail, for just for trying to be human. Those involved in serious interrogations and torture techniques, of course, were different and were hand-picked.

A lot of the guards were just young kids and had joined up for college benefits, not a long-term military career. Before their six-month deployment to Guantanamo they were given two weeks training and told all sorts of crazy stories about the prisoners. They were really scared but by the time their stint was up they were telling us things they weren't meant to.

One guard cried in front of me in Camp Echo. He was crying quite heavily and moaning, "What have I become." I asked him what had happened but he got angry and said leave it alone, so I did. One or two guards even opened the door to my cage at different times and let me sit at a table and have lunch with them, which was not allowed. Several apologised for what their government was doing to me.

There are lots of reports about American soldiers who were ordered to carry out brutal interrogations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo who've become police and jail guards in the US and are now using these methods. This is insidious and becoming institutionalised. This is another reason why American people should be concerned. What the US does abroad to others will eventually be used against its own civilians.

RP: What went through your mind when you were forced to accept the plea deal?

DH: I hated it, but what was even worse was standing in front of the judge, if you want to call him a judge, and listening to him read out the so-called statement of facts and having to say "Yes sir, yes sir."

Knowing the media would be there, I wanted to stand up and say what really went on in Guantanamo. I had a long list of things, but in the end it didn't happen. I hesitated a few times and kept thinking I should be screaming out everything they did to me and were still doing to others, but "Yes sir" kept coming out of my mouth. I was so ashamed for letting myself down and everyone else trapped there but they'd killed something inside me in Guantanamo through fear and submission.

RP: At the same time there were ongoing protests here demanding your release, along with mass opposition to the invasions of Iraq and

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Afghanistan, hostility to the Howard government's treatment of asylum seekers and other attacks on democratic rights. Did you have any idea about this?

DH: Not on that level because we were held incommunicado. Major [Michael] Mori [Hicks's lawyer] could only hint at the support—he had to get permission for what he could show or tell me—so I had no real idea about the protests. The military higher-ups wanted us to feel defeated, beaten and to give up.

RP: You didn't really find out about the extent of the protests until much later. What was your response?

DH: I cried when writing that part of my book. It must have been about 1 or 2 a.m. and I'd been writing since about eight in the morning. It was a long, long stretch and I looked at that picture of my dad protesting in that [mock Guantanamo] cage in New York and I remembered my father before I went overseas. It made me realise what a man he is and how much this experience had changed his life as well as mine.

RP: Why do you think the media and the government keeps demonising you?

DH: I suppose they're all protecting each other, making sure that they're not going to be prosecuted for violating my legal rights. I never broke any Australian laws and no one was hurt at my hands. There certainly were crimes in my story but they were crimes committed against me. The media doesn't want to talk about that or any of the important issues.

In Europe there's been lots of serious coverage on Guantanamo. American journalist Jason Leopold recently got hold of documents revealing that mefloquine, a sort of super malaria drug, was used in Guantanamo. It has horrible LSD-style impacts and other bad side-effects. This was medical experimentation and pretty serious stuff and although it received widespread coverage in Europe, the Australia media didn't touch it.

RP: Towards the end of *Guantanamo: My Journey* you write that you believed justice would win out under the Rudd government. What would you say now?

DH: I really thought Labor would want to separate itself from the Howard government's policies; they're supposed to be different parties. Kevin Rudd and Robert McClelland were quoted in 2006, when they were in opposition, about how bad my treatment was.

McClelland, who is now the attorney-general, said there should be an investigation into the allegations of torture. But nothing has changed from where I stand. The Liberals and John Howard may as well be in government because Labor is defending word for word what happened.

Bush has gone and we've now got Obama, who signed an order against rendition, and said he would close Guantanamo and that there'd be no more CIA black sites. I was hopeful that the situation would change but in many respects it's worse. Guantanamo remains open, with at least 170 people there, and detainees are still being held in black sites.

Most people—the masses that opposed what was done to me—seem to be under the illusion that it's all over because I was released and brought back to Australia. But what's needed is an open and independent investigation into how my situation was handled and what was done. I also want to clear my name.

I know there's some whose minds will never be changed about me but it would be nice if they had opinions based on both sides of the story because this is not about me but is to defend the basic principles that were violated in my treatment.

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