

Bradley Manning testifies on his detention

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30 November 2012

Private Bradley Manning took the stand Thursday at an Army pre-trial hearing at Fort Meade, Maryland, to speak on his lengthy pre-trial detention. It is the first public statement from the accused whistleblower in over two years.

The 24-year-old private, accused of the largest leak of government and military documents in history, has been imprisoned without conviction for 917 days.

“I was in a pretty stressed situation,” Manning told the court, describing the days after his May 2010 arrest. He was kept for weeks in a “segregation tent” at Camp Arifjan, an Army installation in Kuwait. “I had no idea what was going on with anything. I was getting very little information,” he said.

As his isolation deepened, Manning said, “I began to really deteriorate. I was anxious all the time about not knowing anything, days blend into night, night into days. Everything became more insular.” He said he was filled with thoughts of death in his confinement: “My world just shrunk to Camp Arifjan, to that cage,” Manning testified. “I just thought I was going to die in that cage. And that’s how I saw it—an animal cage.”

Conditions were appalling. At one point, Manning fainted from the heat and dehydration. Guards prevented any interactions with other detainees, refusing to take him out of his cell, and denied him access to a phone to call his family. “I didn’t have a good understanding of the reasons,” Manning said. “Someone tried to explain to me but I was a mess. I was starting to fall apart.”

Several times a day, guards did a “shakedown” of his cell, ripping apart everything. Manning’s lawyer, David Coombs, asked him if he had any memory of a breakdown he suffered on June 30, 2010, which Coombs described as “screaming, babbling, banging his head against the cell.” Manning stated, “I knew I had just fallen apart, everything is foggy and hazy at that point.”

A month later, on July 29, Manning was transferred to Quantico, the Marine brig in Virginia. “I had no idea where I was going,” Manning said. “I was very scared, I had no idea.” Guards told him he was being taken to Germany as he was put in full restraint on a plane. “The captain went over the intercom, ‘We’ll be arriving in Germany,’” he said.

At Quantico, Manning was held in 23-and-a-half-hour-a-day solitary confinement in a 6-by-8-foot cell. He was required to sleep with a guard’s light in his face and prohibited to face away from them at night. He was denied his glasses, bedding, had his underwear taken from him, and had to request even such things as toilet paper.

Drawing a rectangle that size in the courtroom Thursday, Coombs asked Manning to describe his conditions. Manning explained that if he tilted his head just right, he could catch a reflection of a skylight through a slit in his cell door. “It was pretty draining. Tiring,” Manning said.

Only with permission could he sit on the edge of his bed during the day and cross his legs. His feet were kept in restraints and he was not permitted to lean against the walls. He was required to remain awake between the hours of 5 a.m. and 10 p.m. with nothing to do. As a result, a mirror in the cell became “the most interesting thing in there” because of the “boredom. Sheer, out-of-my-mind boredom.”

After months of such confinement, Manning said, “I started to feel like I was mentally going back to Kuwait mode, in that lonely, dark, black hole place, mentally.”

All of the abuses were justified with the claim that Manning was at risk of harming himself and others. Earlier in the pre-trial proceedings, military psychiatrists testified on the malicious character and destructive effects of the so-called “prevention of injury” order to which Manning was subjected.

These conditions were part of a deliberate effort,

directed by the Obama administration, to break Manning's mental and emotional resolve. Much of the material Manning is accused of leaking to the whistleblower organization WikiLeaks documents war crimes and a systematic cover-up by the US military and the government. WikiLeaks has never revealed its source.

Thousands of the files relate to the killing of civilians; at least 15,000 previously unreported Iraqi civilian deaths were revealed. The video "Collateral Murder" published by WikiLeaks—showing a 2007 US attack helicopter gunning down journalists, children, and civilian first responders—is attributed to Manning's activity. In that incident, the US government had characterized all 12 civilian casualties as "enemies killed in action." Other documents revealed a formal military policy of ignoring and concealing widespread torture, rape, and murder of Iraqi prisoners.

Manning faces possible life imprisonment if he is convicted by court martial of violating the Espionage Act. Of the 22 charges he faces, the most serious is that of "aiding the enemy." The government has charged that the publication of the classified material, particularly those documents related to war crimes, endangered US forces in the Middle East and aided Al Qaeda—a claim that the Obama administration is unable to substantiate with US casualty rates or supposed terrorist activities.

If Manning is convicted on this charge the case will set a precedent for future whistleblowers, including others in the government and military, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, and all those who support or disseminate "unauthorized" information. The Justice Department has empanelled a federal grand jury to collect evidence about WikiLeaks and its supporters.

On Thursday, Denise Lind, the military judge overseeing the pre-trial hearing, accepted terms offered by Manning's defense team that the young soldier would plead guilty to specific lesser charges in order to argue for reduced sentencing.

This decision does not mean the Army has formally accepted the plea, and even if the government were to drop the more serious charges on which Manning refuses to plead guilty, he would still face 16 years in prison. Military law specialist Eugene R. Fidell of Yale Law School told the *Washington Post* that leniency on the part of the government was unlikely. "Anybody can

plead guilty and hope the government won't bother them anymore," he said, adding, "I assume" the Obama administration would proceed. "Why wouldn't they?"

The defense has also pressed this week for a reduction or dismissal of the sentence on the grounds that the young soldier was subjected to "unlawful pre-trial punishment." Coombs has argued that Manning's detention has far exceeded the limit of that mandated by the military's "speedy trial" provision. Lind rejected this argument Tuesday, and argued that any plea of guilty to subsets of charges waived the right to a speedy trial.



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