

Songwriter PJ Harvey releases song protesting treatment of Guantánamo Bay hunger striker

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British singer/songwriter PJ Harvey released her latest track, “Shaker Aamer,” Saturday, describing the horrific imprisonment and force-feeding of a Guantánamo Bay hunger striker with that name. It is the first song released by Harvey since her 2011 album *Let England Shake*.

Shaker Aamer has been imprisoned without trial at Guantánamo Bay since 2002. He is a Saudi Arabian citizen who worked as a translator for the US government during the Persian Gulf War. He married a British woman, with whom he is father of four children, including one he has not met. Aamer was captured while doing charity work, building schools for the poor in Afghanistan shortly after the September 11, 2011, terrorist attacks.

“Shaker Aamer” is written from Aamer’s perspective as he participates in the ongoing four-month-long hunger strike protesting his abusive treatment and the illegality of his detainment. The strike began on February 6, and has nearly two thirds of the prison population participating, with 45 prisoners scheduled for nightly force-feeding.

Harvey begins the song simply:

“No water for three days.

I cannot sleep, or stay awake.

Four months hunger strike.

Am I dead, or am I alive?

With metal tubes we are force fed.

I honestly wish I was dead.”

Aamer organized and participated in a 2005 hunger strike and many thereafter, and has been held mostly in solitary confinement, beaten and sleep-deprived. The 2005 hunger strike demanded treatment by Geneva Convention standards, including the ability to form a

grievance committee. The demands were not met.

Harvey paints the picture of Aamer’s resulting mental health decline,

*“They took away my one note pad,
and then refused to give it back.*

I can’t think straight, I write, then stop.

Your friend Shaker Aamer. Lost.”

The eerie reverb set on Harvey’s vocals is reminiscent of the state of confusion and disconnection that isolation and hunger bring.

Aamer’s continued incarceration is causing mental health problems not only for him, but also for his wife Zinneera Aamer, who is in treatment for depression since her husband’s capture. When Aamer was captured, he offered his wife a divorce, realizing that he could well be imprisoned for years. His wife refused, saying, “No, I will wait for you.”

Harvey sings, “In Camp 5, eleven years / Never charged, six years cleared”, referencing Aamer’s clearance for release by George W. Bush in 2007 and Barack Obama in 2009. Aamer is the last remaining British prisoner in Guantánamo Bay.

Obama has ignored the current hunger strike, repeating platitudes of goals to transfer some Guantánamo prisoners to their countries of origin. Even while Obama lamented about force-feeding the detainees, US District Judge Gladys said that Obama is “the one individual who does have the authority to address the issue.”

Clive Smith, Aamer’s lawyer, said that “we hope that people listen to this song and think about Shaker Aamer’s plight: detained for eleven long years at Guantánamo, without charge or trial”. Reception of the song shows strong support for Aamer and reflects the

disgust many people feel about the unlawful and undemocratic detention at Guantánamo Bay.

PJ Harvey's music is strongly rooted in history and current events. Her last album, *Let England Shake*, heavily features battle sounds and war songs from World War I and the current US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, complete with lyrics describing the scenes of battle. Harvey criticizes nationalism and colonialism, and promotes an anti-war message by exposing listeners to their gruesome effects. Harvey has won the Mercury Prize twice.

She shows great sensitivity to the powerful forces that affect our world, her defense of Shaker Aamer and other prisoners of war comes as no surprise.

Since the song's release last Saturday, more than 60,000 people have listened to it and it has received dozens of supportive comments. Harvey deserves praise for speaking out against the crimes of the US government and for recording a haunting and beautiful piece of music.



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