

Former Beirut Hostage Speaks Out on the Guantanamo Prisoners

Justice or Revenge?

By Terry Waite

I can recognise the conditions that prisoners are being kept in at the US camp at Guantanamo Bay because I have been there. Not to Cuba's Camp X-Ray, but to the darkened cell in Beirut that I occupied for five years. I was chained to a wall by my hands and feet; beaten on the soles of my feet with cable; denied all my human rights, and contact with my family for five years, and given no access to the outside world. Because I was kept in very similar conditions, I am appalled at the way we - countries that call ourselves civilised - are treating these captives. Is this justice or revenge?

I was determined that my five years in captivity would not break me, and they didn't. But I cannot say that it was easy. The hardest thing for a prisoner in those conditions is the uncertainty. You don't know what will happen to you next: you have no rights, no one to speak to, no one to advise you, no one to fall back on. You only have your own resources. These men, who may or may not be guilty, will be experiencing that sense of isolation and dislocation.

For four years I was kept in solitary confinement and had no companionship at all. I was always blindfolded, or had to wear a blindfold when someone came into the room. I never saw another human being. The initial effect is eerie, but eventually you become accustomed to it. You learn to live from within. But that's tough, and no one should be forced to attempt it.

I had a diet very similar to that being given to these men - bread, cream cheese, rice, beans. I was adequately fed, but not luxuriously, and I lost a lot of weight. The greatest difficulty was never having any exercise in the whole period. I had to get what exercise I could while chained to the wall. I had five minutes a day to go to the bathroom; for the rest of the time I had to use a bottle. The conditions were inhuman, but all the time I had to assert my humanity. What I experienced makes me all the more determined when I say that prisoners of whatever description must be treated humanely and justly. I would stand up for the rights of the alleged terrorist and of any

other individual facing serious charges. I am not soft on terrorism - I have had too many dealings with it to be so - but I am passionate that we must observe standards of justice. I fear that unless firm action is taken to institute just and fair procedures, the long-term results for the US will be catastrophic. Terrorism is not ultimately defeated by the force of arms; you have to deal with the root causes and ask what makes people act in such extreme ways.

It alarms me greatly that the prisoners' status seems to have been determined almost exclusively by the US president and his advisers. Their status should be determined by an independent tribunal. The US seems to be making up the rules as it goes along. First, it said that the appalling acts of terrorism in New York and Washington were acts of war; now it is saying that these captives are not in fact prisoners of war, that they are unlawful combatants. An independent tribunal should establish precisely what they are.

If the US is making up the rules, it will have no moral authority should other countries try, convict and perhaps execute American and European suspects. There will be no moral grounds on which we can stand if we allow this to continue. Americans tell me that they have little patience with international tribunals - they take a long time, and often come up with a different result from that which was hoped. But that is no argument. It doesn't matter how long it takes - justice must be seen to be done, and be done impartially.

I was appalled when I heard a prominent American suggest that in certain circumstances the limited use of torture might be justified. That is a dreadful statement to come from a civilised nation. Torture can never be justified, and must be clearly condemned. When it comes to trial, these men are entitled to basic defence rights and ought to be tried under the auspices of the UN. It is vital that we uphold standards of international law for the protection of the innocent, and for the protection of American or European subjects who may find themselves in difficult circumstances in the future. For once, morality and pragmatism go hand in hand.

Terry Waite is the former special envoy to the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was held captive by terrorists in Beirut from 1987 to 1991.