

An Afghan Boy's Life in U.S. Custody

Camp in Cuba Was Welcome Change After Harsh Regime at Bagram

By Pamela Constable
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NAW ZAD, Afghanistan, Feb. 11 -- Ismail Agha was a slight, illiterate village boy of 13 when his family last saw him 14 months ago. When he reappeared last week, he was three inches taller, his voice had deepened, his chin had sprouted a black beard and he had learned to read, write and do basic math.

Ismail's transformation occurred mostly at a place called Camp Iguana, a seaside compound within the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where he and two other Afghan teenagers suspected of belonging to the Taliban militia were confined for more than 12 months, until their release Jan. 29.

The long-term detention of minors at Guantanamo, where about 650 people suspected of having links to Islamic terrorists are held, has drawn criticism from human rights groups. But Ismail, who spoke with a foreign journalist Wednesday in this remote town in the southern province of Helmand, described his experience as closer to a tropical boarding school than a prison.

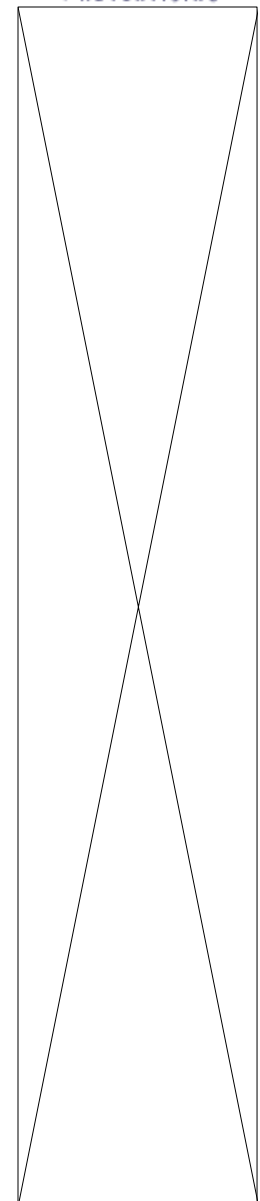
"Me go to Cuba, speak English now," he said with a proud grin as he sat in the police station in Naw Zad, a muddy three-block market center surrounded by bright green poppy fields and almond orchards in pink spring bloom. Ismail's native village, Durabin, is a poor farming community in the mountains that is a five-hour walk from the nearest road leading into Naw Zad.

Transplanted to a modern U.S. military base half a world away, the shy village youth said he saw the ocean for the first time, played soccer, slept in an air-conditioned room and showered twice a day after growing up in a village without plumbing or electricity. "We could even turn the lights on and off when we wanted," he said, lapsing quickly into his native Pashto.

Ismail's time at Guantanamo was in sharp contrast to the harrowing month and a half he spent at Bagram air base, near the capital, Kabul, where he was held and interrogated by U.S. soldiers. Ismail said he was never beaten, but was subjected to pressures that correspond with what the U.S. military refers to as "extreme duress."

"It was a very bad place. Whenever I started to fall asleep, they would kick on my door and yell at me to wake up," he said. "When they were trying to get me to confess, they made me stand partway, with my knees bent, for one or two hours. Sometimes I couldn't bear it anymore and I fell down, but they made me stand that way some more."

Ismail said he was repeatedly asked whether he was with the Taliban or other Islamic groups, and repeatedly answered no. He said he was arrested by mistake while looking for construction work with a



friend at an Afghan military camp in the town of Greshk, in central Helmand province. He said Afghan soldiers beat him and then turned him over to U.S. troops, who flew him by helicopter to Bagram.

"They say you truth tell me, you are Talib. I say me no Talib. They not believe me," he said, speaking in English, then switching back into Pashto.

"I was a boy in my village when the Taliban were the government, and I didn't know anything about them," he added. "The Americans said my friend confessed to being a Talib. I don't know if he was, but we met when we were looking for work. I had nothing to tell them, and I don't think they ever got any benefit from me."

U.S. military officials in Afghanistan have refused to disclose the names or numbers of Afghan detainees held at Bagram at any time, and they have never allowed public access to the detention facilities there, except for visits by delegates from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

After more than a month at Bagram, Ismail said, he was warned that if he did not confess he would be sent to a terrible and distant place called Guantanamo. Shortly after that, he said, he was put on a plane with other prisoners, chained by the wrists and ankles, with a hood placed over his head.

"It was hard to breathe, but I didn't complain because I didn't hear any of the others complaining," he said. "I don't know how long the flight was, but when they flew me back home the other day, I did not have a hood on and I counted the time. It was 23 hours."

Once he arrived at Guantanamo, Ismail said, he was astonished by the change.

There were no more questions and no more threats, only school and exercise and Muslim prayers and dorm life with two other young Afghans he had never met before. He said both were from Paktia province, one his age and one a little younger, and that he knew them only as Asadullah and Naqibullah.

The boys lived in a house with several rooms: a shared sleeping room and an adjoining room for eating and studying. On one side they could see the ocean, but the other three sides were blocked by high walls and barbed wire, and they never saw or spoke with the adult prisoners.

Each day, Ismail said, they were taught English, Pashto and basic math by Afghan American teachers. They were also given copies of the Koran. Each night, four U.S. soldiers took turns sleeping in the second room. On Wednesday, he asked to send greetings to all of them, but said he never learned their names.

In response to criticism about the detention of minors at Guantanamo, U.S. military officials have said that age makes no difference in their decisions to confine suspects who might have links to terrorist groups or who might be able to provide information about them. However, Ismail and his dorm mates were separated from the adult detainees and given special treatment as youngsters.

The most difficult aspect of his confinement, Ismail said, was being out of contact with his family and worrying about them, partly because he was the oldest son and his father depended on him to help support the family.

When he first reached Guantanamo, he said, he asked a translator to write home on his behalf. After he learned to write in Pashto a little bit, he said, he wrote several letters and gave them to Red Cross delegates, who he said visited every one or two months.

"I always asked them when I would be released, and they always told me soon, God willing," Ismail said.

But last week, after Ismail was reunited with his father, he learned that most of the letters, addressed to relatives in Naw Zad, never reached his family in their village. For nearly one year, they knew nothing of his whereabouts.

"I sent my son out to look for construction work, and he just vanished," said Ismail's father, Hayatullah, an illiterate farmer of about 60, who was in Naw Zad on business this week and waited for two days with a journalist while a messenger went to fetch Ismail from Durabin. "I went to all the work sites in the towns, but no one had seen him. Finally I thought he must be dead."

Then sometime last November, Hayatullah said, he received a letter through the Red Cross in which Ismail said he was in good health and staying in a place called Guantanamo. Hayatullah had no idea what that meant, so he made his way to Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital, and asked the authorities.

"They told me it was a jail in the United States. I was amazed," said the short, white-bearded man Wednesday as he and his son sat in the Naw Zad police chief's office. "I could not imagine what the Americans wanted with him, but I was glad to know he was alive."

That was the only word the family received until about 10 days ago, when someone from the Red Cross found Hayatullah in Naw Zad and told him Ismail would soon arrive at the airport in Kandahar, a large southern city.

Meanwhile, back at Camp Iguana, Ismail was informed that he would be leaving shortly for home.

"They gave me a party and said I could have anything I wanted to eat, so I asked for Pepsi and chicken kebob," he said. "They also gave me a letter that said if I was ever arrested again, I would be sent to prison and never let out." Then he and the two other boys were put on a plane, again in shackles but this time without being hooded.

Last week they arrived at Bagram, and Ismail was then flown on a Red Cross plane to Kandahar. Red Cross officials in Kabul have declined to discuss the release of Ismail or the two other boys, citing a policy of confidentiality and the special issue of their being minors.

"I didn't recognize my son even when he came up and kissed my hand," Hayatullah said. "He was much taller and a little fatter, and he had a beard. Also, he told me he had learned to read." The old man sat up and smiled. "My son got an education in America."

Ismail was also proud of his academic progress, but said he planned to go back to farming his family's land and did not expect to continue studying. He said that although he had enjoyed the modern comforts of Guantanamo, "it was still a jail. And when you are home beside your father and mother, it doesn't matter whether your life is hard."