

March 17, 2004

Guantánamo and Jailers: Mixed Review by Detainees



European Pressphoto Agency

Some of the 23 Afghans who were freed from American detention at Guantánamo arriving in Kabul. Two men reported harsh treatment during captivity, as did three detainees who were released in Britain.

By AMY WALDMAN

KABUL, Afghanistan, March 16 — Twenty-three Afghan detainees from the American detention center at Guantánamo, Cuba, were freed here on Tuesday, one of the largest releases of prisoners so far.

In Britain, three citizens released last week from Guantánamo said they had endured starvation, beatings, abusive interrogations and months of unwarranted solitary confinement. The three — Shafiq Rasul, 26; Ruhul Ahmed, 22; and Asif Iqbal, 22 — also said in the Sunday Observer that they had been arrested as they traveled to Pakistan for Mr. Iqbal's marriage to a young woman from Faisalabad.

Interviews with three of the freed Afghan prisoners offered distinctly different views of life in American custody. None of the accounts could be independently verified.

When similar accusations arose last Thursday, Lt. Cmdr. Barbara Burfeind, a Pentagon spokeswoman, dismissed them as completely false. "All detainees are treated humanely and, to the extent appropriate and consistent with military necessity, in accordance with the principles of the Third Geneva Convention of 1949," she said.

Together, the latest assertions suggested that the Americans maintain a two-tiered jail system.

One detainee, Haji Osman, 50, a businessman who spent 18 months at Guantánamo, is still not sure why. He was released along with an 18-year-old cousin. The Americans told him they were sorry, he

said.

Haji Osman was been happy to be in prison, he said, away from his five children, but over all he was well treated. The container he and 9 or 10 other prisoners were housed in had electric lights, hot and cold running water, air conditioning, a bathroom, shampoo and soap — amenities his own home in the Barmal district of Paktika Province lacks.

"It was just like the house of a person with better economic conditions," he said.

He said that he was able to spend about six hours a day outside his cell, and that groups of prisoners were allowed to play table tennis, soccer and volleyball. He said he was chained only during interrogation, and ate well enough to put on weight.

Haji Osman said not all prisoners shared his relative level of comfort. At Bagram Air Base, where he was taken when he was first arrested, he said, some prisoners were forced to stand for up to two hours as punishment. At Guantánamo, some were kept in cells by themselves and allowed to play sports with only one other person.

Two other prisoners released here on Tuesday and interviewed at the offices of the International Committee of the Red Cross offered decidedly darker views.

The first, Muhammad Sidiq, a 30-year-old truck driver from Kunduz Province, said he had been beaten, first at Bagram, then at Guantánamo. "They started covering our faces and they started beating us on our head and giving electric shock," he said. For two or three weeks, he thought he was going to go crazy, he said. But then the beating stopped, although he was often kept in chains.

Mr. Sidiq said he was put in an iron-style house like a container, and slept in a place that was about 9 feet long and 7 feet wide. He could not see other prisoners most of the time.

Newly free, he said he would go to Kunduz to try to find work and a wife. "I am illiterate but I can recite the holy Koran," he said.

The third man, Aziz Khan, a 45-year-old father of 10, said he was taken from Paktia Province more than two years ago because he had four Kalashnikov rifles in his home.

He was sometimes kept in chains and sometimes "put in a place like a cage for a bird," sometimes in a place like a freight container. "They had very bad treatment toward us," he said. "Americans are very cruel. They want to govern the world."

"May God not take any Muslim there," he said of Guantánamo.

The three men from Britain whose detention was described in The Observer also told of harsh treatment at Guantánamo. They told of beatings and abuse by American soldiers, who they said had stood on the backs of their legs as they kneeled and held guns to their heads during questioning.

They spoke of "extreme conditions," including frequent beatings.

Though the British government has asserted that it was seeking to win the release of the nine Britons still held in Guantánamo Bay, the three men said British intelligence was an integral part of the interrogation force that conducted more than 200 sessions with each one of them.

Patrick E. Tyler contributed reporting from London for this article and Sultan Munadi from Kabul.