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6 Kuwaiti detainees accuse U.S. of abuses

They told a lawyer at Guantanamo that confessions were linked to the harsh treatment.

Frank Davies
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WASHINGTON - Six Kuwaiti prisoners said they were severely beaten, given electric shocks, and sodomized by U.S. forces in Afghanistan before they confessed to fighting with the Taliban and were sent to the prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, their attorney said yesterday.

Tom Wilner said the Kuwaitis told him that most physical abuse ended at Guantanamo, but they were subjected to sexual and religious humiliation and prolonged isolation.

Captured in Pakistan or Afghanistan about three years ago, the Kuwaiti men reported that were taken to U.S. bases in Afghanistan where they were hung by their wrists, beaten with chains, and subjected to electric shock, said Wilner, who represents 11 Kuwaiti prisoners at the detention center at the U.S. Navy base in eastern Cuba.

The men said that after they were subjected to the abuse, they admitted they had joined the Taliban or had met with al-Qaeda members, Wilner said.

"You told them what they wanted to hear to make them stop," one detainee told him.

Two detainees said that while at Guantanamo, crosses were shaved into their scalp or body hair. The group said they were stripped naked and kept hooded for long periods of time, and female guards taunted them, Wilner said.

'Safe, humane'

Navy Lt. Cmdr. Flex Plexico, a spokesman for the Defense Department, said yesterday that detention operations at Guantanamo were "safe, humane and professional," adding that the U.S. military investigates "credible allegations of illegal conduct."

Plexico said some of the abuse allegations seemed to follow instructions in an al-Qaeda training manual, which urge detainees to falsely allege abuse or mistreatment.

Human-rights groups and defense lawyers have long said that some information used as the basis for incarcerations at Guantanamo resulted from abuse or torture. Many of the 545 prisoners there have been held for more than three years, most without charge. About 150 have been let go, but officials have not given explanations for their release.

An Army brigadier general and the Justice Department's Office of Inspector General are investigating reports of abuse at Guantanamo. Human-rights groups have called for an independent inquiry.

The Supreme Court ruled in June that detainees at Guantanamo could challenge their imprisonment. Wilner interviewed the six detainees from Jan. 10 to 13. His notes on his meetings were recently declassified by the government, and he discussed them with reporters yesterday after receiving permission.

An appeal to Bush

He said similar complaints of abuse had come from six other Kuwaitis he represents. One Kuwaiti was released last month.

Khalid al-Odah, whose son Fawzi is in Guantanamo, said in a telephone interview from Kuwait City yesterday that President Bush should intervene.

"President Bush, either charge them with crimes and try them in U.S. courts, or if you have nothing against them, set them free," said Odah, who heads a committee of relatives in Kuwait working for the prisoners' release.

Along with Fawzi al-Odah, Wilner interviewed Fayiz al-Kandari, Fouad al-Rabia, Abdullah al-Ajmi, Abdulaziz al-Shammari and Abdullah al-Kandari.

During military review tribunals last year, the Defense Department said the Kuwaitis were enemy combatants affiliated with either al-Qaeda or the Taliban. The tribunals did not investigate whether any confessions were produced by torture.

The Kuwaitis said they first went to Afghanistan on humanitarian missions to aid the poor. Several said they supported the Taliban government, which for years protected al-Qaeda.