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Afghan airline ex-exec appears in Gitmo

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ASSOCIATED PRESS
December 30, 2004

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- The former president of Afghanistan's state-run airline appeared before a U.S. military review tribunal in Guantanamo, an official said Wednesday.

The 32-year-old man headed Ariana Airlines while it was under the control of the ousted Taliban regime, said Capt. Beci Brenton, a Pentagon spokeswoman. The detainee, whose name was not released, was arrested in January 2003 in Afghanistan, Brenton said.

Brenton said the Taliban used the airline to transport military forces between the Afghan capital, Kabul, and southern Kandahar province. Much of Ariana's fleet was destroyed during the U.S.-led bombing campaign in 2001.

It was unclear what the prisoner said at his hearing Tuesday. The Associated Press filed a Freedom of Information Act request more than a month ago to obtain transcripts of testimonies. The government still has released none of the transcripts.

One other prisoner, a 27-year-old with alleged ties to al-Qaida, went before the tribunals Tuesday at the naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The detainee was arrested at a Pakistani checkpoint with a top official from Al-Wafa, a charity in Afghanistan that the U.S. military believes helped fund the al-Qaida terrorist network, Brenton said.

More hearings were scheduled for Wednesday.

The Combatant Status Review Tribunals are meant to determine whether the approximately 550 prisoners at the U.S. base are correctly held as "enemy combatants" or should be freed.

Anyone who supported the Taliban or the al-Qaida terrorist network is an "enemy combatant," according to the U.S. government. Human rights groups complain the definition is vague and affords fewer legal protections than prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions.

Prisoners are not allowed attorneys at the tribunals, and are only told unclassified portions of the allegations against them.

The tribunals have considered at least 524 cases so far. They have ordered two prisoners released and another 226 to remain in custody.

All the detainees at Guantanamo are accused of links to al-Qaida or the Taliban. Many have been held for nearly three years without charge or access to attorneys.