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Released Documents Reveal Details on Guantanamo Detainees

Edited transcripts are from hearings of review board

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GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba -- In 2,733 pages of declassified documents released yesterday, men accused of helping terrorist groups or Afghanistan's former Taliban regime pleaded for freedom while US military officers often painstakingly tried to find holes in their stories.

The transcripts were the second batch of Guantanamo Bay detainee hearings released by the Pentagon in response to a lawsuit by the Associated Press. They identified more of the prisoners who have been secretly held without charges for up to four years while the military determines how dangerous they may be.

Most of the men said they were innocent and would pose no threat if set free.

Zie Ul Shah, a Pakistani accused of being a driver for the Taliban, said he hated his American captors at first but his feelings softened after he learned about the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"In the beginning I did not like Americans at all," Shah said. "I had never seen Americans. In the beginning when I came here the interrogations were tough and I started hating them more, but then . . . someone showed me pictures from 9/11. Then I realized they have a right to be angry. My hate toward Americans was gone."

In all, 715 prisoners have passed through the cells of the US military base since it began receiving men captured in the war in Afghanistan more than four years ago. Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said 490 detainees are now held at the base, which hugs the arid southeastern shores of Cuba.

Whitman told reporters at the Pentagon that authorities have gained a wealth of knowledge by interrogating detainees, who are held in cellblocks behind barbed wire.

"We've learned about Al Qaeda's pursuit of WMDs," Whitman said, referring to weapons of mass destruction. "We've learned about their methods of recruitment, location of recruitment centers. We've learned about their skill sets, their terrorist skill sets, both general and specialized operative training."

A reading of some of the documents released yesterday showed no such stark admissions, although records of interrogations and the classified portions of the hearings were not included in the transcripts. The hearings -- called Administrative Review Boards -- were held to determine whether detainees still posed threats to the United States.

Human rights group Amnesty International, a frequent critic of US policies in its war on terror, said the transcripts would most likely reveal information that was insignificant or had been previously released.

"Nevertheless, Amnesty International welcomes today's actions, as even the seemingly minor details in these documents may help shed light on the secrecy surrounding the detainees' cases," said Eric Olson, the group's acting director of government relations.

Each of the detainees who faced such a review hearing was previously determined by other Guantanamo Bay panels -- Combatant Status Review Tribunals -- to be an "enemy combatant," meaning they fought against the United States or its allies or provided support to the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or "associated forces."

Shah said he thought his testimony at the earlier tribunal had been ignored. "Should I consider (you all) the same or should I expect justice?" he asked.

The presiding military officer assured Shah all the evidence would be considered fairly:

"Well, I hope that you would believe that we would do you justice after we review all the information," said the officer, whose name was censored from the transcript for security reasons.

Some detainees said they had hazy memories as they gave curt replies to the officers presiding over the tribunal. One unidentified Yemeni said he did not recall when he was captured in Pakistan, saying it was more than four years ago.

"Was it cold?" asked the presiding officer, trying to determine if not the date, then the season.

"The weather was medium. It was not hot but it was not cold," responded the detainee.

Many detainees repeatedly denied having links to Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, or the Taliban, insisting they were simply caught up in the war zone. Some were accused of being low-level members of the Taliban, who imposed strict Islamic rule in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

"I don't know bin Laden and I don't know anyone else," said an Afghan detainee named Gano Nasorllah Hussain. "I am a butcher and I have a shop in my village."

In response to a Freedom of Information lawsuit, the Defense Department released about 5,000 pages of transcripts on March 3.