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Guantanamo Prisoners Say Arabs, Muslims Sold by Pakistanis to Americans

Michelle Faul
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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico - Pakistani tribesmen slaughtered a sheep in honor of their guests: Arabs and Chinese Muslims famished from fleeing U.S. bombing in the Afghan mountains.

But their hosts had ulterior motives: to sell them to the Americans, said the men who are now prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

Bounties ranged from \$3,000 to \$25,000 US, the detainees testified during military tribunals, said transcripts the U.S. government gave The Associated Press to comply with a Freedom of Information lawsuit.

A former CIA intelligence officer who helped lead the search for accused terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden told AP the accounts sounded legitimate because U.S. allies regularly received money to help catch Taliban and al-Qaida fighters. Gary Schroen said he took a suitcase with \$3 million in cash into Afghanistan to help supply and win over warlords to fight for U.S. Special Forces.

"It wouldn't surprise me if we paid rewards," said Schroen, who retired after 32 years in the CIA soon after the fall of Kabul in late 2001.

He recently published the book *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*.

Schroen said Afghan warlords like Gen. Rashid Dostum were among those who received bundles of notes.

"It may be that we were giving rewards to people like Dostum because his guys were capturing a lot of Taliban and al-Qaida," he said.

Pakistan has handed hundreds of suspects to the Americans but Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed told the AP: "No one has taken any money."

The U.S. departments of defense, justice and state and the Central Intelligence Agency also said they were unaware of bounty payments being made for random prisoners.

The U.S. Rewards for Justice program pays only for information that leads to the capture of suspected terrorists identified by name, said Steve Pike, a U.S. State Department spokesman. Some \$57 million has been paid under the program, its website said.

It offers rewards up to \$25 million for information leading to the capture of bin Laden and Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

But a wide variety of prisoners at the U.S. camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, alleged they were sold into capture. Their names and other identifying information were blacked out in the transcripts from the tribunals, which were held to determine whether prisoners were correctly classified as enemy combatants.

One detainee who said he was an Afghan refugee in Pakistan accused the country's intelligence service of trumping up evidence against him to get bounty money from the U.S.

"When I was in jail, they said I needed to pay them money and if I didn't pay them, they'd make up wrong accusations about me and sell me to the Americans and I'd definitely go to Cuba," he told the tribunal.

"After that, I was held for two months and 20 days in their detention, so they could make wrong accusations about me and my (censored), so they could sell us to you."

Another prisoner said he was on his way to Germany in 2001 when he was captured and sold for "a briefcase full of money" then flown to Afghanistan before being sent to Guantanamo.

"It's obvious. They knew Americans were looking for Arabs, so they captured Arabs and sold them - just like someone catches a fish and sells it," he said.

The detainee said he was seized by "mafia" operatives somewhere in Europe and sold to Americans because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time - an Arab in a foreign country.

A detainee who identified himself as a Saudi businessman said: "The Pakistani police sold me for money to the Americans."

"This was part of a roundup of all foreigners and Arabs in that area," of Pakistan near the Afghan border, he said, telling the tribunal he went to Pakistan in November 2001 to help Afghan refugees.

The U.S. military-appointed representative for one detainee - who said he was a Taliban fighter - said the prisoner told him he and his fellow fighters "were tricked into surrendering to Rashid Dostum's forces. Their agreement was that they would give up their arms and return home."

"But Dostum's forces sold them for money to the U.S."

Several prisoners who appeared to be Chinese Muslims - known as Uighurs - described being betrayed by Pakistani tribesmen along with about 100 Arabs.

They said they went to Afghanistan for military training to fight for independence from China. When U.S. planes started bombing near their camp, they fled into the mountains near Tora Bora and hid for weeks, starving.

One detainee said they finally followed a group of Arabs, apparently fighters, being guided by an Afghan to the Pakistani border.

"We crossed into Pakistan and there were tribal people there and they took us to their houses and they killed a sheep and cooked the meat and we ate," he said.

That night, they were taken to a mosque, where about 100 Arabs also sheltered. After being fed bread and tea, they were told to leave in groups of 10, taken to a truck, and driven to a Pakistani prison. From there, they were handed to Americans and flown to Guantanamo.

"When we went to Pakistan the local people treated us like brothers and gave us good food and meat," said another prisoner.

But soon, he said, they were in prison in Pakistan where "we heard they sold us to the Pakistani authorities for \$5,000 per person."

There have been reports of Arabs being sold to the Americans after the U.S.-led offensive in Afghanistan but the testimonies offer the most detail from prisoners themselves.

In March 2002, the AP reported Afghan intelligence offered rewards for the capture of al-Qaida fighters - the day after a five-hour meeting with U.S. Special Forces. Intelligence officers refused to say if the two events were linked and if the United States was paying the offered reward of 150 million Afghanis, then equivalent to \$4,000 a head.

That day, leaflets and loudspeaker announcements promised "the big prize" to those who turned in al-Qaida fighters.

Said one leaflet: "You can receive millions of dollars...This is enough to take care of your family, your village, your tribe for the rest of your life - pay for livestock and doctors and school books and housing for all your people."

Helicopters broadcast similar announcements over the Afghan mountains, enticing people to "Hand over the Arabs and feed your families for a lifetime," said Najeeb al-Nauimi, a former Qatar justice minister and leader of a group of Arab lawyers representing nearly 100 prisoners.

Al-Nauimi said a consortium of wealthy Arabs, including Saudis, told him they also bought back fellow citizens who had been captured by Pakistanis.

Khalid al-Odha, who started a group fighting to free 12 Kuwaiti detainees, said his imprisoned son, Fawzi, wrote him a letter from Guantanamo Bay about Kuwaitis being sold to the Americans in Afghanistan.

One Kuwaiti who was released, 26-year-old Nasser al-Mutairi, told al-Odha interrogators said Dostum's forces sold them to the Pakistanis for \$5,000 each and the Pakistanis in turn sold them to the Americans.

"I also heard that Saudis were sold to the Saudi government by the Pakistanis," al-Odha said.

"If I had known that, I would have gone and bought my son back."