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Detainee Transcripts Reveal More Questions

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Named detainees: 186, citizens of two dozen countries including Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Accusations: recruiting for the Taliban, helping Osama bin Laden escape U.S. troops, harboring gunmen who attacked American special forces.

These details, and many more, emerge from more than 5,000 pages of newly released transcripts of detainee hearings at the U.S. military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. But as much as they reveal about the U.S. war against terrorism, much more remains unknown — the answers tantalizingly beyond reach.

Where, for example, is Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the suspected mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks, who was captured in Pakistan three years ago by CIA officers and Pakistani authorities?

He may be among the more than 600 detainees who have been held at Guantanamo Bay whose names don't appear in the transcripts, obtained through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit filed by The Associated Press. Or he might be at the U.S. military base on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, or in one of the secret detention centers allegedly used by the CIA to interrogate al-Qaida suspects.

The transcripts, of hearings held to determine whether a detainee is an enemy combatant, don't say.

None of the terrorist organizers captured by America and its allies appears in the transcripts. It's possible that high-value detainees with considerable evidence against them wouldn't have tried to challenge their status as enemies of the United States.

The only exception is Abu Zubaydah, an al-Qaida commander. A detainee mentioned to the tribunal that Zubaydah, who was wounded and captured in March 2002 in a gunbattle in Pakistan, was being held at Guantanamo Bay.

Many of those whose names do appear are accused of relatively minor or vague offenses, such as working as a driver or cook for the Taliban or receiving military training. Others were accused of fighting U.S. troops or coordinating ambushes. The detainees often denied the accusations, saying they were farmers, merchants or charity workers who in some cases were simply caught up in the Afghan war.

Nor do the transcripts fully illuminate the quality of evidence that has kept detainees behind bars at Guantanamo Bay, some for more than four years. The transcripts describe only unclassified evidence, much of it ambiguous.

The transcripts mark the first time that large numbers of detainees have been officially identified, but the Pentagon hasn't said whether these men are still in Guantanamo or were among the 267 prisoners released or transferred to date.

What is clear from the transcripts is the frustration of detainees trying to defend themselves against often hazy accusations.

The lack of concrete evidence cited in the transcripts against detainees — many of whom were captured in Afghanistan in the months following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks — might create the impression they're being held unjustly, said John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org, a military policy think tank.

"I think it is going to strengthen the perception that we've rounded up a bunch of bystanders — that we just rounded up a bunch of Muslims to torment them," Pike said. He pointed out that pursuing shadowy enemy combatants is completely different from nailing common criminals.

Attorney Gaillard Hunt, who represents a Guantanamo Bay detainee, said he has seen heavily censored classified evidence against his client, and described it as thin.

"It was underwhelming," Hunt said.