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Ex-inmates share Guantanamo ordeal

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A stream of visitors has been coming to the door of Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost in Pakistan's city of Peshawar.

But they are not visiting because it is a traditional festival season - Abdul Rahim is being welcomed back because he has returned from Guantanamo Bay.

The 42-year-old was one of a batch of 17 Afghans released last month from the controversial American prison in Cuba.

Abdul Rahim's younger brother, Badar Zaman Badar, was also at Camp X-Ray, but was freed six months earlier.

Both hold Pakistani nationality as well.

They say they spent three difficult years in US custody and that they had done nothing wrong.

Censored

While Abdul Rahim entertained his guests, Badar sat in their library talking about their ordeal.

The small room was full of Islamic books, many spilling on to the floor through lack of space.

Among the old leather volumes was a black plastic binder full of carefully stacked letters they wrote while in the US military prison.

Most were painstakingly scrutinised and censored.

"They would censor sentences written by us saying that we would all be free soon," said Badar.

Badar said he and his brother were arrested by the Pakistani secret agency, ISI, and police during a raid on their house in November 2001.

The two were kept in solitary confinement for two months, then transferred to the US military base at Bagram, near Kabul.

Finally, they were taken to Kandahar and on to Cuba.

The brothers, both journalists and part-time gemstone dealers, said they had been arrested on false accusations from political rivals.

They denied any contacts with either the Taleban regime or al-Qaeda.

"Although we did not have any links with the Taleban we did support them in our writings," said Badar.

Prolific writer

The brothers said the Americans shaved the inmates' beards and screamed and swore during the frequent interrogations.

"We were not subjected to any physical torture as such but even shaving our beards and taking off our clothes is a form of cruelty," said Abdul Rahim.

He said a number of Arab prisoners had still not spoken to their investigators after three years to protest at the desecration of the Koran by guards.

Abdul Rahim is a prolific Pashto writer.

His brother showed us copies of three pro-Taleban magazines - Ahsan (Justice), Zeray (Good News) and Dawat (Invitation) - he edited before his detention in Peshawar.

Abdul Rahim said he had once been a member of Afghan rebel leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami party, but severed ties to the group.

In detention he kept his sanity by writing poems. In his first months of confinement, Abdul Rahim's poetry was full of despair.

At first, deprived of paper and pen, he memorised his best lines or scribbled them secretly on paper cups.

He recited a verse: "What kind of spring is this where there are no flowers and the air is filled with a miserable smell?"

Later, he was provided with writing materials only to have all but a few of the documents confiscated by the US military upon his release.

"They should return us our work," he said.

However, the poems he wrote in letters back home were kept by his oldest son.

Precious stones

The two brothers did not see each other for 14 months during their confinement. Later, they were housed in adjacent cages.

The US government has declared all such prisoners "enemy combatants" subject to indefinite detention and ineligible for many of the rights accorded to prisoners of war.

Hundreds have now been freed as they are considered unimportant or not a threat to US interests.

There are now about 520 prisoners from some 40 countries.

Badar said the number of Pakistanis was down from 70 or 80 to only three.

Abdul Rahim did not seem interested in seeking any compensation but his younger brother disagreed.

"If they don't compensate us then we might seek justice in court," Badar said.

"My business suffered because of my arrest and my family suffered as well, having two members taken there.

"We also demand the return of millions of rupees of precious stones taken by the Pakistani police and the ISI."