

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Ex-detainee deported to Saudi Arabia

Hamdi gave up U.S. citizenship

By Donna Abu-Nasr

Associated Press

October 12, 2004

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia -- A Saudi-American captured in Afghanistan, labeled an enemy combatant and held in U.S. solitary confinement for nearly three years without being charged, returned to his family Monday after agreeing to forfeit his U.S. citizenship for freedom.

Yasser Esam Hamdi, who was captured in Afghanistan in late 2001 during the U.S. battle against the Taliban, landed in Saudi Arabia about noon Monday, an Interior Ministry spokesman, Brig. Gen. Mansour al-Turki, said.

"His parents were there to receive him. The minute he arrived, he said he had given up his U.S. nationality," al-Turki said.

The deal with the U.S. government freeing Hamdi required he give up his U.S. citizenship and live in Saudi Arabia for five years. He also had to renounce terrorism and agree not to sue the United States over his imprisonment. Hamdi is banned from travel to Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Pakistan or Syria.

Hamdi's lawyer, Frank Dunham, a federal public defender in Virginia, said he spoke to Hamdi after his military plane landed and he said the former detainee felt "awesome."

"I think one thing I'm disappointed in is I just wish everybody in the U.S. could know this young man. This is a really nice young man, someone Saudi Arabia can be proud of," Dunham said.

"He didn't fight anybody. He didn't shoot anybody. He didn't do anything that commentators assumed that he did. He's come through it with a greater appreciation for wisdom of his father, who told him not to go to Afghanistan in the first place."

Hamdi was thought to have been taken to the family home in the eastern industrial town of al-Jubail.

Hamdi's case led to a U.S. Supreme Court decision limiting the president's powers to indefinitely hold enemy combatants.

The 550 prisoners held at the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, are classified as enemy combatants, a status that affords fewer legal protections than prisoners of war. About 60 of the men are contesting their detentions in federal courts but the majority have never seen a lawyer. Only four have been charged.

The Supreme Court ruled in June that Hamdi and other detainees classified as enemy combatants could not be held indefinitely without charge. That led to the negotiations for Hamdi's release.

Under an agreement with the U.S. Justice Department, Hamdi will not be charged with any crime. The release agreement also requires Hamdi to notify Saudi officials if he becomes aware of "any planned or executed acts of terrorism."

The Justice Department in turn agreed not to ask the Saudi government to detain Hamdi, who U.S. officials have said no longer poses a threat and no longer has any intelligence value.

Hamdi's lawyer said he would sign papers Monday to dismiss the case and turn them over to government lawyers.

Hamdi was born in Louisiana in 1980 to Saudi parents, and was raised in Saudi Arabia. He was captured on a battlefield in Afghanistan in late 2001.

He contends he never fought against the United States and that he had been trying to get out of Afghanistan when he was captured.

Hamdi was taken to the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay, then transferred to a Navy brig in Norfolk, Va., when officials realized he was a U.S. citizen. He was later moved to a Navy brig in Charleston, S.C. He spent his captivity in solitary confinement.

Hamdi's lawyer said the agreement called for Hamdi to be returned to Saudi Arabia by the end of September, and he originally was set to be flown out Sept. 26.

The flight from Charleston was delayed because of bad weather and because of what U.S. officials called a minor snag in discussions with Saudi authorities.