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Families of Guantanamo Prisoners Waiting

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GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba - When American troops liberated Kuwait from Iraqi forces in 1991, Fawzi al-Odah's father said the smiling teenager greeted approaching U.S. tanks, took a small American flag from a soldier's hand and began cheering. The forces he once saw as saviors, however, have become his captors at Guantanamo Bay.

Like many prisoners who were brought to this remote camp in eastern Cuba when it opened three years ago, birthdays have passed, relatives have died, siblings have graduated and parents have wept with little communication other than censored postcards from their sons.

"Sometimes my wife calls my other son Fawzi. Other times I wake up in the middle of the night and find her sleeping in Fawzi's room," said his father Khalid al-Odah during a telephone interview from Kuwait. "It's an unbearable sadness most of the time."

Fawzi Al-Odah, 27, was captured after going to Pakistan to teach the Quran in a poor border village near Afghanistan where he had volunteered to help a group of Afghan refugees. The U.S. government accuses him of having links to Afghanistan's ousted Taliban regime, though like most of the some 550 prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, he has not been charged.

During the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, the 13-year-old boy saw a Kuwaiti family being beaten by Iraqis at a checkpoint, and others whose faces were frozen in fear when the Iraqi forces came. To him, the Americans were heroes, said his father, who once lived in San Antonio, Texas, where he trained during the 1970s as a pilot for the Kuwaiti military.

"I remember Fawzi being really, really happy when the Americans came, and him hugging the soldiers," said al-Odah. "I still have love and respect for the United States because the Americans liberated my country, but what this administration is doing is tearing me apart."

Proponents of the mission at Guantanamo point to the some 3,000 lives lost during the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. Critics, however, say many of the Guantanamo prisoners have been wrongly imprisoned because they were Muslims captured during the U.S.-led war.

Assuming some may be returned to their homelands, U.S. troops are working hard to prepare the men for release with literacy plans and other programs, which could soften any resentment, says Army Brig. Gen. Jay Hood, the commander of the Guantanamo Bay mission.

Azmat Begg, 66, father of British prisoner Moazzam Begg, said the wait has been long and his family has been turned upside down since his son was taken to the prison camp three years ago.

"It's very hard, especially for Moazzam's wife," he said during a telephone interview from London, referring to his daughter-in-law, who has four young children.

Begg, 36, is one of four Britons being held at Guantanamo Bay. According to his father, he had been trying to set up a school in Afghanistan to teach literacy but was in Pakistan when American bombing raids to dislodge the Taliban started.

"The United States was supposed to be a beacon of human rights, dignity, the rule of law and freedom," said al-Odah, whose hair has turned gray, watching his other son and daughter graduate from university and his wife's mother die. "We don't understand what is happening."