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French detainee said in 'wrong place'

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Associated Press
February 24, 2005

PARIS - Mustaq Ali Patel is one of the last three French detainees being held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and his family members say they can't figure out why he's there in the first place.

Cousins of the Indian-born former imam say Patel, 45, was just a victim of bad luck and bad timing who had settled in Afghanistan in the early to mid-1990s - long before the U.S.-led invasion of the country.

Patel was one of seven French citizens captured in the U.S.-led campaign that toppled the hard-line Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Four have returned to France, and all spent more than two years at Guantanamo.

"As a family, we all believe he was in the wrong place at the wrong time," said one cousin, Luqman Dawod, a British citizen who arrived from Manchester on Wednesday to meet with one of Patel's French lawyers. "We don't believe he has done anything wrong."

Haroon Patel, another cousin, who runs a convenience store in Manchester, said: "He is not a terrorist, he was a good person." They said they did not know when Patel was detained.

French officials said this month that U.S. authorities indicated the "possibility" that Patel and two other French nationals - Ridouane Khalid and Khaled Ben Mustafa - could soon be handed over to France.

"They've said that time and time (again), but I don't hold my breath any more," said Dawod.

Four other French citizens once held at Guantanamo - Mourad Benchellali, Imad Kanouni, Nizar Sassi and Brahim Yadel - returned to France in late July and are being held as part of an investigation into suspected terror-related networks.

Patel's case appears different, his lawyer said.

"As for Mr. Patel, from what I know, we're looking at a series of bad coincidences and slightly disastrous random events," said French lawyer William Bourdon. "He was in Afghanistan long before the Taliban" ran the country, he said.

Bourdon, who also represents Sassi and Benchellali, said they had indicated "harassment, humiliation and insults" at Guantanamo but did not suffer sexual abuse that some other ex-detainees have recounted.

A Pentagon spokesman, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Alvin "Flex" Plexico, would not comment specifically on the cases of the French nationals but said "credible allegations of illegal conduct by U.S. personnel are taken seriously and investigated."

He added that "U.S. policy condemns and prohibits torture," describing Guantanamo as "a safe, humane and professional detention operation."

Patel's cousins said he had drifted out of contact with the family about 10 years ago - and no relatives knew he was in Afghanistan until they received a letter from him through the mail early last year.

Patel became a citizen of France through marriage to a French woman. The cousins said they have lost contact with her but say she is believed to live in La Reunion, a French island in the Indian Ocean.

His mother, who lives in India's Gujarat state, has not heard from her son in more than 20 years but calls the British cousins about once a week to find out if they have more information, they said.

Dawod, 25, said the only other letter the family had received - delivered via the Red Cross - indicated that "he has not been in good shape mentally," but there were no details.