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Guantanamo Briton 'in handcuff torture'

David Rose on the allegation that a British detainee was suspended by his wrists as punishment for reciting the Koran while in US military custody

David Rose
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A British detainee at Guantanamo Bay has told his lawyer he was tortured using the 'strappado', a technique common in Latin American dictatorships in which a prisoner is left suspended from a bar with handcuffs until they cut deeply into his wrists.

The reason, the prisoner says, was that he was caught reciting the Koran at a time when talking was banned.

He says he has also been repeatedly shaved against his will. In one such incident, a guard told him: 'This is the part that really gets to you Muslims, isn't it?'

The strappado allegation was one among many made about treatment at both Guantanamo and the US base at Bagram in Afghanistan made to the British lawyer Clive Stafford Smith when he visited his clients Moazzam Begg and Richard Belmar at the Cuban prison six weeks ago, having tried for the previous 14 months to obtain the necessary security clearance.

But it is clear the disturbing claim is only the tip of the iceberg. Under the rules the United States military has imposed for defence lawyers who visit Guantanamo, Stafford Smith has not been allowed to keep his notes of meetings with prisoners, and will not be able to read them again until they have been examined and de-classified by a government censor.

He cannot disclose in public anything the men have told him until it too has been de-classified, on pain of likely imprisonment in the US.

Stafford Smith has drawn up a 30-page report on the tortures which Begg and Belmar say they have endured, and sent it as an annexe with a letter to the Prime Minister which Downing Street received shortly before Christmas. For the time being - possibly forever - the report cannot be published, because the Americans claim that the torture allegations amount to descriptions of classified interrogation methods.

However, Stafford Smith's letter to Tony Blair - which has been declassified - says that on his visit to the Guantanamo prisoners, he heard 'credible and consistent evidence that both men have been savagely tortured at the hands of the United States' with Begg having suffered not only physical but 'sexual abuse' which has had 'mental health consequences'.

Thousands of documents obtained last month under the US Freedom of Information Act by the American Civil Liberties Union support the claims of torture at Guantanamo, which has apparently continued long after the publication last April of photographs of detainees being abused at the US-run Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. They include memos and emails to superiors by FBI and Defense Intelligence Agency officers, who say they were appalled by the methods being used by the young military interrogators at Guantanamo.

According to the memos, the abuse was 'systematic', with frequent beatings, chokings, and sleep deprivation for days on end. Religious humiliation was also routine, with one agent reporting a case in which a prisoner was wrapped in an Israeli flag.

'On a couple of occasions I entered interview rooms to find a detainee chained hand and foot in a foetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water,' an anonymous FBI agent wrote on 2 August. 'Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves, and had been left there for 18 to 24 hours or more.'

Reports of identical treatment were first published by The Observer last March, in interviews with three British detainees who had been released - Shafiq Rasul, Asif Iqbal and Ruhel Ahmed. They were then strenuously denied by the Pentagon. But according to another FBI memo dated 10 May, when an agent asked Guantanamo's former commander, Major General Geoffrey Miller, about techniques the FBI regarded as illegal, he was told that the interrogators 'had their marching orders from the Sec[retary] Def[ense]', Donald Rumsfeld. General Miller told the US Congress under oath that although Rumsfeld had authorised the use of dogs to intimidate prisoners at Guantanamo, this had never happened. According to the memos, this was inaccurate.

Stafford Smith asks Blair in his letter 'to approach the plight of my clients with renewed vigour'. Asked by The Observer whether he planned to do this last week, a Downing Street spokesman declined to comment.

In a second letter, to the Foreign Office minister Baroness Symons, Stafford Smith suggests that Britain's complicity in abusive techniques at both Guantanamo and Afghanistan, where Begg and Belmar were held before being taken to Cuba, is wider than previously thought.

Begg and Belmar, he writes, were both questioned by an MI5 officer who gave his name as 'Andrew', while they were being abused by Americans both in Afghanistan and Guantanamo. According to the letter, 'he was the one who told Mr Begg that the more Mr Begg (falsely) said he was guilty of something, the quicker he would get home. Andrew was also the one who said that he would not comply with both of my clients' requests for consular notification, as well as Mr Begg's requests to learn whether his pregnant wife, Sally, and their three children were safe in Pakistan.' Stafford Smith is asking for Andrew's full name and access to him, to assist his client's defence.

Having fled Afghanistan where he had been trying to set up a school before the war against the Taliban began in October 2001, Begg was abducted by American agents from the house the family was renting in Islamabad.

Belmar was captured after attending a religious school for a few weeks before the 11 September terrorist attacks. An FBI source who personally questioned him before he was sent to Guantanamo has told The Observer he recommended his immediate release because he had 'no involvement' with terrorism, but was overruled by MI5.

Stafford Smith says in his letter to Baroness Symons that Begg made a false written confession after being tortured in February 2003, when two agents who had abused him at Bagram - where Begg witnessed the deaths of two prisoners officially classed as homicide - came to Guantanamo. But neither he nor Stafford Smith have been allowed to see this statement, which apparently forms the main grounds for his continued incarceration. Stafford Smith asks the Foreign Office for help in obtaining a copy, and asks: 'What kind of civilised legal system does not allow the suspect to see his own statements? How can the prisoner's statement be said to be classified information when, if it were true, the prisoner would already know it?'

Last night the Foreign Office said 'we are trying to do our utmost' for the four British detainees while 'we take every allegation of torture seriously'. The request for information about the MI5 man would be considered.

Azmatt Begg, Moazzam's father, said he had given up hope the British government would intervene in a meaningful way to help his son. 'They are not protecting their own citizens, but merely falling in with whatever the Americans want to do.'