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Lawyer Tells Amnesty Meeting Tale of a Guantanamo Detainee

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His torturers in Morocco took a razor blade to Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi's genitals and told him to admit he had dined with top al-Qaeda officials, human rights attorney Clive Stafford Smith told about 300 people in Philadelphia yesterday.

But that and other abuses - some so heinous that Stafford Smith promised not to repeat them publicly - were not the worst of what happened to al-Habashi in Afghanistan, Stafford Smith said.

"He said none of the torture was as bad as being stuck in a dark room for 20 days and forced to listen to [rap artist] Eminem," said Stafford Smith, speaking at Amnesty International's 2005 Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference.

Today, al-Habashi, 27, remains among about 500 men detained at the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay. He is one of 40 Stafford Smith is representing. Stafford Smith has seen formal charges against only five of them, he said.

Born in Ethiopia, al-Habashi moved to England when he was 16. Stafford Smith said his client went to Afghanistan to recover from a drug habit he developed in London and to see what life under Islamic law was like.

Returning to England just after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, al-Habashi was picked up at Karachi Airport in Pakistan and questioned by the FBI, who accused him of being a top al-Qaeda operative. Stafford Smith said al-Habashi couldn't speak Arabic.

Next, al-Habashi was flown to Morocco, where his torturers took a blade to his penis numerous times, and then to the Americans in Afghanistan, Stafford Smith said. Al-Habashi was flown to Guantanamo in 2004.

"The number of prisoners in Guantanamo who are innocent is shocking," he told the crowd.

The three-day conference also included speeches about the death penalty; economic, social and cultural rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights; refugees and asylum-seekers rights; and gun control.

Amnesty International USA board member Ellen Dorsey told the crowd at the Crown Plaza Center City that "each and every one of us must see ourselves as the front line."

"Are you outraged?" Dorsey asked at the end of the three-day event. "Are you inspired to act?"

Canadian Nissa Jetha, 21, answered her question with a resounding, "yes."

Jetha, a student at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, said she believed most people were ill-informed about the different types of human rights violations taking place around the world.

"I think getting the facts out is an integral part to having the violations... eliminated in the future," Jetha said.

Maaret Klaber, 20, agreed.

"If you have all the facts, then you absolutely have to do something about it," said Klaber, who runs a small Amnesty International club at McDaniel College, in Westminster, Md.

Stafford Smith, who has visited Guantanamo seven times, had planned to return today, but will be unable to make the trip because of Hurricane Wilma.

Currently, some inmates are on a hunger strike to protest conditions and long confinement without trial. The government, in a release last week, said fewer than 40 of the inmates remained on the hunger strike. Stafford Smith put the number involved in the strike that began last month closer to 200.

"While you're sitting here eating lunch," Stafford Smith told the crowd. "Prisoners at Guantanamo are on a hunger strike to protest their captors' treatment of them."

In an interview after the event, Stafford Smith - legal director with Reprieve, a British group opposed to the death penalty - said he had had some success and that about 12 of his clients had been released. But, he said, their release has not come through a fair and speedy trial.

"The only way we get people out," he said, "is through the court of public opinion."