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Program Twists Torture into TV

Show based on alleged abuse

SHELLEY EMLING

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LONDON — They were held in cages and verbally abused. They were subjected to sleep deprivation, forced to remove their clothes and exposed to extreme temperatures.

The alleged torture techniques used on suspected terrorist suspects at the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, may rile human rights groups, but a British TV channel is betting the controversial methods also could provide perfect fodder for the ultimate reality TV show.

As part of its so-called "torture season," Channel 4 — the same channel that brought the reality TV hit "Big Brother" to the world — plans to broadcast "The Guantanamo Guidebook" on Monday.

The four-part series will re-create torture techniques allegedly used by U.S. interrogators at Guantanamo Bay. The series also will examine whether the knowledge gained from terrorist suspects was worth the kind of relentless abuse that some say was heaped on them.

"Obviously we had to work within certain parameters of the law, and so we could only subject them to the milder forms of torture," said Yad Luthra, a spokesman for Channel 4, which is seeking to sell the program in other countries.

Of the seven volunteer participants — including three Muslims and four other Britons — three failed to stay the 48-hour course.

One dropped out after eight hours upon showing signs of low body temperature. Another dropped out on religious grounds. A third simply had had enough after 40 hours.

"Two vomited and two wet in their pants," Luthra said. "The torturers were quite tough on them."

The techniques were based on information from declassified U.S. documents. They were carried out by former U.S. military interrogators in a redesigned warehouse in east London, he said.

The U.S. government has denied using torture at the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, where many of the more than 500 detainees are being held without charge. The last four Britons held at Guantanamo Bay were released last month.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Army announced that it was setting specific limits on the interrogation techniques used on prisoners of war and linking them more closely to international agreements such as the Geneva Conventions.

While Channel 4 says its series offers an important examination of whether torture is ever justified, viewers' groups aren't so sure.

"I don't think turning torture into some kind of entertainment is a great idea," said John Beyer, director of a TV watchdog group, Mediawatch UK.

"Channel 4 has a reputation for broadcasting programs that are controversial simply for the sake of being controversial."

But Steve Crawshaw, director of Human Rights Watch UK, said that the program could be helpful as a way of showing just how damaging even seemingly innocuous torture techniques can be.

The organization consulted with Channel 4 on the series.

Luthra said the seven volunteers had various reasons for participating in the program that had little to do with seeking their 15 minutes of fame.

"The Muslim guys very much wanted to act in solidarity with Muslims who've suffered," he said.

Of the other participants, he said, "Some went into it very hawkish about the whole thing and supportive of the methods.

"Of course, those people had changed their minds by the end," he said.