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Saudi Prisoner Faces Guantanamo Review

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GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba -- A Saudi prisoner accused of attending a terrorist training camp to fight in Chechnya and Kashmir appeared before a U.S. military review tribunal Thursday, rejecting most accusations against him.

Appearing dazed and unkempt with unruly hair and beard, the Guantanamo prisoner was the 140th to have his case reviewed by a three-member panel.

The United States accuses the man of being recruited in Saudi Arabia to fight in Chechnya and Kashmir and of training at the al-Farouk terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. The military says he joined Afghanistan's Taliban regime after a Fatwa, or religious edict, from Sheik Ha al-Uqla at the Imam Muhammad Bin Saud College in Burayda, Saudi Arabia.

One of his aliases was also allegedly found on a list of al-Qaida members who had reportedly been captured. The military said the list was found on the hard drive of a senior al-Qaida member.

"The words that you said are not true," said the 23-year-old man, who journalists are prohibited from naming. "I did not go to Chechnya or Kashmir. I never met that sheik who was mentioned and I never fought with the Taliban or al-Qaida."

Five review tribunals were scheduled for Thursday, although two prisoners refused to participate. There have been 56 prisoners who have refused to attend. No reasons were given.

The reviews, or so-called Combat Status Review Tribunals, are meant to determine whether some 550 prisoners at the outpost in eastern Cuba should be freed or have been held properly as enemy combatants, a distinction that affords fewer legal protections than prisoners of war.

All of prisoners are expected to have their status reviewed by the end of the year. If the government upholds their cases as enemy combatants, they then go before an administrative review board that will look at whether they still pose a threat to the United States or its allies, or whether they still possess valuable intelligence.

Only one Pakistani prisoner has been freed so far in the review tribunals.

The reviews are separate from military commissions meant to try charged prisoners. The first commission is scheduled to begin in December for one of four charged men.

"The tribunals take a fresh look at all the information available about each individual to make a determination of their enemy combatant status," said Lt. Cmdr. Daryl Borgquist, a spokesman. "The detainee is presented with an unclassified list of information in the government's possession."

Some of the criticism over the tribunals has been that the prisoners only know a fraction of the information the government has and cannot deny accusations.

Although the Saudi detainee denied training to fight in Chechnya and Kashmir on Thursday, he said he received physical and handgun training at a camp in Afghanistan but did not know its name. None of the panel members asked him why he sought out the training.

The man also said information provided by an interrogator about the alleged Fatwa was incorrect. No panel members asked any follow-up questions about the sheik or the Fatwa.

Prisoners are now allowed attorneys during the administrative proceedings.

Despite the detention mission nearing its third year, the first review tribunal only took place July 30, about a month after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that prisoners have the right to challenge their detentions in federal court.

There are about 60 habeas corpus cases pending now, although no Guantanamo prisoners have been allowed to travel to the United States for proceedings.

The Saudi man was in Tora Bora and captured in Pakistan shortly after crossing the border. He said he was trying to make it to the Saudi Embassy after being in Afghanistan for about two months. He was then put into U.S. custody.

A Yemeni prisoner accused of being Osama bin Laden's errand boy appeared before a hearing Wednesday, also denying statements by an interrogator and saying he was mistreated by U.S. troops in Guantanamo and Afghanistan.

Six other cases went before the review tribunals Wednesday, including two men -- ages 20 and 29 -- who had been held for nearly three years and refused to participate; a 24-year-old who was accused of being a Taliban fighter who surrendered to the Northern Alliance; a 25-year-old who has been held for 2 1/2 years and was accused of being posted as a Taliban guard near Kunduz. He was allegedly injured in Mazar-e-Sharif.