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## **My Guantanamo Diary**

Face to Face With the War on Terrorism

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GUANTANAMO BAY , Cuba

The sailor at the entrance to CampEcho peers through the gate as Peter and I hold up our laminated blue cards. "HC," for habeas counsel, they read. "Escort Required." He waves us through, searches our bags for recording devices, then issues safety instructions -- dial 2431 on the wall phone in the room -- in case anything should happen in our meeting with prisoner No. 1154.

The gravel crunches beneath our shoes as we follow a soldier across a dusty courtyard to a painted brown door. Before we go in, I drape the shawl I'm carrying over my head and arms. This is my first meeting with a GuantanamoBay detainee, and I'm feeling nervous about sitting down with a man who may be a terrorist.

Ali Shah Mousovi is standing at attention at the far end of the room, his leg chained to the floor. His expression is wary, but when he sees me in my traditional embroidered shawl from Peshawar, he breaks into a smile. Later, he'll tell me that I resemble his younger sister, and that for a split second he mistook me for her.

I introduce myself and Peter Ryan, a Philadelphia lawyer for whom I'm interpreting. I hand Mousovi a Starbucks chai, the closest thing to Afghan tea I've been able to find on the base. Then I open up boxes of pizza, cookies and baklava, but he doesn't reach for anything. Instead, in true Afghan fashion, he urges us to share the food we have brought for him.

Mousovi is a physician from the Afghan city of Gardez, where he was arrested by U.S. troops 2 1/2 years ago. He tells us that he had returned to Afghanistan in August 2003, after 12 years of exile in Iran, to help rebuild his wathan , his homeland. He believes that someone turned him in to U.S. forces just to collect up to \$25,000 being offered to anyone who gave up a Talib or al-Qaeda member.

As I translate from Pashto, Mousovi hesitantly describes life since his arrest. Transported to Bagram air base near Kabul in eastern Afghanistan, he was thrown -- blindfolded, hooded and gagged -- into a 3 1/2 -by-7-foot shed. He says he was beaten regularly by Americans in civilian clothing, deprived of sleep by tape-recordings of sirens that blared day and night. He describes being dragged around by a rope, subjected to extremes of heat and cold. He says he barely slept for an entire month.

He doesn't know why he was brought to GuantanamoBay. He had hoped he would be freed at his military hearing in December 2004. Instead, he was accused of associating with the Taliban and of funneling money to anti-coalition insurgents. When he asked for evidence, he was told it was classified. And so he sits in prison, far from his wife and three children. More than anyone, he misses his 11-year-old daughter, Hajar. When he talks about her, his eyes fill with tears and his head droops.

I don't know exactly what I had expected coming to GuantanamoBay, but it wasn't this weary, sorrowful man. The government says he is a terrorist and a monster, but when I look at him, I see simply what he says he is -- a physician who wanted to build a clinic in his native land.

A guard knocks at the door, signaling time's up. Mousovi signs a document agreeing to have Peter represent him in filing a petition for habeas corpus before U.S. civilian courts. "I pray to Allah," he says, holding his palms together, "for sabar." Patience. He stands up as Peter and I say goodbye. When I glance back after we walk out, he is still standing, gazing after us.

It was Google that got me to Gitmo.

My interest in the U.S. military base in Cuba was sparked by an international law class I took last year at the University of Miami. I decided I wanted to become involved in what is going on there. So I Googled the names of the attorneys on the landmark 2004 Supreme Court case *Rasul v. Bush*, which held that the U.S. court system had authority to decide whether non-U.S. citizens held at Guantanamo Bay were being rightfully imprisoned. Then I started bombarding them with calls and e-mails expressing my desire as a law student, a journalist and a Pashtun to help, both on the legal end and as an interpreter.

The very existence of the military detention camp at Guantanamo Bay seemed an affront to what the United States stands for. How could our government deny the prisoners there the right to a fair hearing? I didn't know whether they were innocent or guilty -- but I figured they should be entitled to the same protections as any alleged rapist or murderer.

Maybe part of my interest had to do with my heritage. My Pashtun parents are doctors who met in medical school in Peshawar, a city in northwest Pakistan near the Afghan border. They came to the United States to continue their medical educations. I was born in America in 1978, but I grew up speaking Pashto at home, and am a practicing Muslim. I've always felt the pull of my heritage, and the tragedy of the Afghan people, whose country has been overrun so many times throughout history.

As an American, I felt the pain of Sept. 11, and I understood the need to invade Afghanistan and destroy the Taliban and al-Qaeda. But I also felt the suffering of the Afghans as their country was bombed. And when hundreds of men were rounded up and thrust into a black hole of detention, many with seemingly no proof that they had any terrorist connections, I felt that my own country had taken a wrong turn.

The attorneys I e-mailed eventually put me in touch with Peter Ryan at Dechert LLP, which represents 15 Afghan detainees. After a rigorous six-month background check for a security clearance, off I went in January on my first trip to the base.

I've now been down a total of nine times. And each time, I'm struck by the ordinariness of Guantanamo Bay, the startling disconnect between the beauty of the surroundings and the evil they mask.

I expected a stern, forbidding place. Instead I found sunshine and smiling young soldiers, boozy nighttime barbecues and beaches that call to you for a midnight swim. I've also found loss and tears. Over three months, I've interpreted at dozens of meetings with detainees and heard many stories -- of betrayal and mistaken identity, of beatings and torture, of loneliness and hopelessness.

I've listened to Wali Mohammed protest that he was just a businessman trying to get along in Taliban-run Afghanistan. I've watched Chaman Gul, crouched in his 7-by-8-foot cage, weep for fear that his family will forget him. I've marveled at the pluck and wit of Taj Mohammad, a 27-year-old uneducated goat herder who has taught himself fluent English while in Cuba.

No matter the age or background of the detainee, our meetings always leave me feeling helpless. These men show me the human face of the war on terrorism. They've been systematically dehumanized, cast as mere numbers in prison-camp fashion. But to me, they've become almost

like friends, or brothers or fathers. I can honestly say that I don't believe any of our clients are guilty of crimes against the United States. No doubt some men here are, but not the men I've met.

I wish we could just hand our clients the freedom they desperately crave, but so far, we haven't been able to, though three of Dechert's clients were released at the military's discretion before any of us ever even went to the prison. Still, our work with those who remain seems to give them what they need to persevere -- a thread of hope.

The trip to Gitmo begins at the commuter terminal of Florida's Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. With the exception of one corporate law firm that has become known for making a grand entrance in a chartered private jet, the attorneys doing habeas work at GuantanamoBay fly the puddle-jumper Lynx Air or Air Sunshine.

At the airline counter, you're asked to show clearance documentation from the Defense Department. Passengers are then weighed for optimum weight distribution on the tiny propeller planes. The 10-seat cabin is so small you can't stand up straight. There are no bathrooms, either, so everybody hits the restroom several times before boarding.

The flight from Fort Lauderdale takes three hours because you have to go around the island to avoid Cuban airspace. Upon arrival, we're greeted by armed U.S. Army personnel who direct us to customs, which consists of a couple of brown tables where more Army boys rifle through our bags.

The base is divided into two areas -- the leeward side and the windward side -- by the 2 1/2 -mile-wide GuantanamoBay. The main base is on the windward side, which is where the detention camps are built. Habeas counsel are lodged on the leeward side, at the combined bachelor quarters, or CBQ, for \$20 a day.

There is cable TV, a phone, dial-up Internet, a small kitchen and maid service. Each room has four twin beds. On my first trip, I debated whether to sleep in a different bed each night.

Gitmo is a strange place, but soon after arriving, you find yourself adjusting to its clockwork military rhythm. Every morning begins at 7:30. It's usually bright and sunny. The Jamaican gardener, Bartley, is always yelling something or other. Everyone meets at the concrete tables at the front of the CBQ to wait for the bus, which leaves at exactly 7:41 a.m. It takes us to the ferry and pulls in at 7:51 a.m., just as the ferry is docking. At precisely 8:20 a.m., we're dropped off on the windward side, where we're always greeted by one of three military escorts who hand out our habeas badges. Next stop is Starbucks and the food court to pick up food for the detainees and to have breakfast. Then on to CampEcho, the special section of the base where meetings with detainees are held.

The only part of the Gitmo experience that doesn't run with military precision are these meetings. More often than not, there's a delay in bringing the prisoners over to CampEcho. Once, we had to wait five hours on the bus. This frustrates the attorneys, given the weeks of work they've spent preparing. Not to mention that the ice cream we bring turns to soup.

As we leave our meeting with Mousovi, I pull the heavy shawl off my head. Primo, our military escort, is standing outside the fenced compound, taking deep drags off a Marlboro Red. We pile onto the bus, and Peter picks up a large manila envelope, seals his stack of handwritten notes inside and writes "1154" on the outside. The notes will be sent to Washington for classification review.

Primo drives us and another group of attorneys to the Navy Exchange. Adjacent to this large supermarket are a Subway, a gift shop and ATMs. Across the street there's a KFC and a McDonald's. At the exchange, we pick up a stack of porterhouse steaks, charcoal, potatoes,

chips, lots of beer and assorted wines. Everyone barbecues for dinner, because other than the Clipper Club, a small greasy spoon that serves fried hot dogs and pizza, there's nothing to eat where we're based.

Over steak dinner, I comment on how nice our military escorts are. They joke and laugh with us. Primo gives me pointers on shooting pool in the CBQ lobby. Everyone brings them beer and cigarettes. I think I had expected them to be more aloof, even hostile.

But Tom Wilner, a partner in the Washington office of Shearman & Sterling LLP, quickly retorts: "Yeah, they're nice. But this whole place is evil -- and the face of evil often appears friendly."

His words hit me hard. Tom is one of the most passionate lawyers working at Guantanamo Bay. He gets angry talking about the conditions under which the detainees live. Most are held in isolation in cells separated by thick steel mesh or concrete walls. Every man eats every meal alone in his small cell. The prisoners are allowed out of their cells three times a week for about 15 minutes to exercise, often in the middle of the night, so many don't see sunlight for months at a time.

Tom and his firm got involved representing 12 Kuwaiti detainees in March 2002, after a group of families contacted him. At first, like most of the lawyers here, Tom took up the cause because of the legal principles at stake. But after he finally met the detainees in January 2005, his attitude changed. Suddenly he was fighting for real people. "Most of these guys," he says, "were totally innocent and simply swept up by mistake."

I think of Ali Shah Mousovi when he says that. Even the presiding officer at Mousovi's hearing declared that he found it "difficult to believe" that the United States had imprisoned Mousovi and flown him "all the way to Cuba." Yet here he sits.

One of the things Tom hates most is having to tell his clients that a close relative has died while they've been detained. But he has had to do so countless times: Fouad al-Rabiah's father and brother died; Omar Amin's father died; Nasser al-Mutairi's father died; Saad al-Azmi's father died; Khaled al-Mutairi's father died; Fawzi al-Odah's grandmother died.

"The way these men have been treated and what they've had to suffer makes me ashamed," Tom says. He and the other lawyers think it's a joke that the iguanas at Guantanamo Bay, which are protected by the U.S. Endangered Species Act, have more rights than the detainees.

Tonight, Tom is intense, going on about the face of evil, how so many of the perpetrators of some of the worst crimes in history were men who appeared perfectly ordinary, who were kind to children and dogs. I can't stop thinking about what he says.

After dinner, I take a 10-minute walk down a barren dirt road to a breathtaking secluded beach and drown everything out in the cool of the evening water. The waves keep rushing in and blending with the peaceful Cuban shore.

At 80, Haji Nusrat -- detainee No. 1009 -- is Guantanamo Bay's oldest prisoner. A stroke 15 years ago left him partly paralyzed. He cannot stand up without assistance and hobbles to the bathroom behind a walker. Despite his paralysis, his swollen legs and feet are tightly cuffed and shackled to the floor. He says that his shoes are too tight and that he needs new ones. He has asked for medical attention for the inflammation in his legs, but has not been taken to a hospital.

"They wait until you are almost dead," he says.

He has a long white beard and grayish-brown eyes that drift from Peter's face to mine as we explain his legal issues to him. In the middle of our meeting, he says to me: "Bachay." My child.

"Look at my white beard. They have brought me here with a white beard. I have done nothing at all. I have not said a single word against the Americans."

He comes from a small mountain village in Afghanistan and cannot read or write. He has 10 children and does not know if his wife is still alive -- he hasn't received any letters.

U.S. troops arrested Nusrat in 2003, a few days after he went to complain about the arrest of his son Izat, who is also detained at Guantanamo Bay. Nusrat is charged with being a commander of a terrorist organization in Afghanistan with ties to Osama bin Laden, and with possession of a cache of weapons. Izat, who appeared as a witness at his father's military hearing, maintained that the weapons in question were in a storehouse set up by the Afghan defense ministry, which he was paid to guard and maintain.

During our meeting, Nusrat's emotions range from anger to despair. In his desperation, he begins to promise Peter that he will make him famous if he helps him get home. "Everyone in Afghanistan will know your name," he says. "You will be a great, famous lawyer."

As I interpret, I feel a lump growing in my throat. Suddenly, I can't speak. Peter and Nusrat pause as the tears flood down my face and drip onto my shawl.

The old man looks at me. "You are a daughter to me," he says. "Think of me as a father." I nod, aligning and realigning pistachio shells on the table as I interpret.

As the meeting ends and we collect our things to go, the old man opens his arms to me and I embrace him. For several moments, he prays for me as Peter watches: "Insha'allah, God willing, you will find a home that makes you happy. Insha'allah, you will be a mother one day. . . ."

He lets me go and asks me to say dawa, prayers, for him. "Of course," I promise. "Every day."

And until the next time I see him, I will.

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