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Detainee Says He Was Tortured While in U.S. Custody

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SYDNEY, Australia - Mamdouh Habib still has a bruise on his lower back. He says it is a sign of the beatings he endured in a prison in Egypt. Interrogators there put out cigarettes on his chest, he says, and he lifts his shirt to show the marks. He says he got the dark spot on his forehead when Americans hit his head against the floor at the prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

After being arrested in Pakistan in the weeks after Sept. 11, 2001, he was held as a terror suspect by the Americans for 40 months. Back home now, Mr. Habib alleges that at every step of his detention - from Pakistan, to Egypt, to Afghanistan, to Guantánamo - he endured physical and psychological abuse.

The physical abuse, he said, ranged from a kick "that nearly killed me" to electric shocks administered through a wired helmet that he said interrogators told him could detect whether he was lying.

Speaking publicly for the first time since he was freed two weeks ago, Mr. Habib, a 49-year-old Australian citizen born in Egypt, also described psychological abuse that seemed intended to undermine his identity - as a husband, a father and a Muslim man. At Guantánamo, he said, he was sexually humiliated by a female interrogator who reached under her skirt and threw what appeared to be blood in his face. He also said he was forced to look at photographs of his wife's face superimposed on images of naked women next to Osama bin Laden.

Mr. Habib's claims of mistreatment and torture cannot be confirmed, yet many are in line with accounts from other former detainees, as well as from human rights reports and from some government agents involved in the detention system. In addition, Australian officials confirm Mr. Habib's movements during his confinement, including his imprisonment in Egypt, where his lawyers say the United States sent him for harsh interrogation through a process known as rendition.

There is a part of his experience that Mr. Habib will not address, the months before the Sept. 11 attacks when Australian intelligence officials say Mr. Habib trained at two camps for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. The officials also said Mr. Habib told his wife in a phone call just days before Sept. 11 that something big was going to happen in the United States. Mr. Habib said he planned to sue the Australian government for not protecting him, and then, "I will answer every single question in a court."

American officials said he admitted to training some of the Sept. 11 hijackers and to having prior knowledge of the attack, but they never charged him. Mr. Habib said any confessions he made were a result of torture and were not genuine.

"Whatever they wanted me to sign," he said, "I signed to survive."

Despite his activities in Afghanistan, Australian officials said there was no evidence that he trained any of the hijackers. One official said, "I have absolutely no sympathy for him," but added that whatever he did, it did not justify the torture he said he had endured.

A Pentagon spokesman, Lt. Cmdr. Alvin Plexico, declined to address Mr. Habib's specific claims, saying in a statement that there was no evidence that any Australian in Defense Department

custody "was tortured or abused." The C.I.A. declined comment and the embassies of Egypt and Pakistan in Australia did not respond to questions.

Mr. Habib recounted his story, previously outlined in legal papers, during interviews with The New York Times, with his Australian lawyer, Stephen Hopper, present much of the time. Mr. Habib also spoke with the Australian television news program "60 Minutes," which paid him an undisclosed amount for the interview, people involved in the arrangements said.

He said that during months and months of detention: "I don't feel anything anymore. I want to die." This week, standing at the water's edge north of Sydney, looking out at an expanse of sailboats and the green woods beyond, he said, "Until now, I believe I'm dreaming."

Drawn to Militant Islam

Mr. Habib was arrested in early October 2001 on a bus to Karachi, where he was to catch a flight home. For several years he had been growing increasingly militant in his Muslim faith, and he had gone to Pakistan, he had told friends in Australia, to find a religious school for his children.

Mr. Habib, who Australian intelligence officials knew as a committed follower of militant Islam ideology, was detained in a prison in Islamabad. Australian officials said their investigators questioned Mr. Habib in Pakistan, along with American interrogators.

When the sessions began, Mr. Habib said, an American woman, who spoke both Arabic and English, asked the questions: Had he been to Afghanistan? Whom did he know there? He was shown pictures. Did he know these men?

He said he was defiant and told his interrogators: "I don't have to talk to you. I don't know who you are."

He said the American woman told him "this is your last chance," and that an Australian official said, "I'm sorry for you, Mr. Habib, you're never going to see your kids anymore."

Mr. Habib said he was taken to a room with hooks on the wall and a barrel, set sideways like a roller, on the floor. His arms were stretched out, he said, and each wrist was handcuffed and fastened to a hook on the wall. By his description, the only way not to be left hanging was to stand on the barrel; an electric wire ran through it. Mr. Habib said he believed the interrogators in that room were Pakistani.

Mr. Habib said that when he refused to confess to being part of a 1995 terror plot, one man turned on the current. He lifted his feet to avoid the shock, he recalled, and he was suspended from the wall.

"I lost everything," he said. He doesn't know how long he was unconscious, but he said that when he came to, he again refused to confess to terrorism. While he was still hanging from the wall, another man, who said he was a martial arts expert, came in and, Mr. Habib said, "starts jump-kicking in my face, jump-kicking in my stomach."

The next night, he said, the Pakistanis took him to an airport where he saw 15 or 20 beefy men wearing masks, black T-shirts and combat boots. From their voices, he said, he knew they were Americans. Mr. Habib started to fight with the Pakistanis, he recalled, and "then the Americans came and started beating me."

They beat him quiet and stripped him naked, he said. Men in black masks came into the room. One had a still camera, the other a video camera. "They make picture of everything in my body," he said.

He said he was handcuffed and shackled and put on a plane. Then, he said, the men put duct tape over his mouth, a bag over his head and goggles over the bag.

In November 2001, Maha Habib received a fax from the Australian Foreign Ministry. "We remain confident that your husband is detained in Egypt," it said, adding that "the government has received credible advice that he is well and being treated well."

Family Ties as Torture Tools

Mr. Habib's lawyers have alleged that he was sent to Egypt as part of the rendition program, which the United States has used increasingly to transfer terror suspects to countries where they can be interrogated, sometimes using practices not allowed in the United States, according to American diplomats and C.I.A. officers. In recent months, several stories have emerged of men who say they were the subject of renditions and complain of being mistreated by their captors.

One frequent destination for renditions, those officials say, is Egypt, which has a history of torture. In its 2003 human rights report, the State Department said "there were numerous credible reports that security forces tortured and mistreated detainees."

"Welcome to Egypt," Mr. Habib said he was greeted in Arabic when he arrived at a prison. The interrogation began almost immediately, he said. Were you in Afghanistan? Whom did you know there? Why were you there?

When he refused to answer, Mr. Habib said, the interrogators told him: "We have here two ways to make people talk. Nicely, what we're talking to you now. But we have another way."

Then someone kicked him, he said. "This kick nearly killed me. I jumped maybe three, four meter."

Mr. Habib said that his chief interrogator spoke Arabic and English and later appeared in Afghanistan when Mr. Habib was held there. He said that during interrogations, he was surrounded by men who hit him and doused him with ice water.

During what he called "the worst day in my life," Mr. Habib said an interrogator told him: "Mamdouh, I've got your family here - you're going to talk to us." The interrogator taunted him with the possibility of seeing his wife and four children. Mr. Habib said that in his delirium, he believed they were there. When he realized they were not, he said, "I became crazy."

He said he jumped up, still shackled to a chair, and attacked the interrogator.

He said he was dragged from the room, handcuffed. "And they hang me from the ceiling," he said. "They got sticks and everyone, they go on beating me." He lifted his shirt to show the bruise on his back. "I want to die," he said.

Touched by Female Soldiers

After several months in Egypt, his treatment improved. Then, he said, he was driven to the airport, where he was taken by men Mr. Habib described as "fully Americans."

In April 2002, the Australian government issued a statement saying Mr. Habib "was being held in custody by the United States military in Afghanistan." He said other detainees told him he was at the Bagram air base, an American detention site.

In Afghanistan, he said, female soldiers "touched me in the private areas" while questioning him. "They was swearing at me, 'you criminal,' 'you terrorist,'" he said. Interrogators also put a helmet

connected to wires on his head, Mr. Habib said. When they did not like his answers, he said he would feel a jolt, and his body would start shaking.

He spent only a week at Bagram before being flown to Guantánamo in May 2002. He arrived sick and faint. "I was really scared," he said. "I don't know who I am."

When his interrogators asked about his treatment in Egypt, he said, he told them about the psychological abuse using his wife and children. Soon, he said, his Guantánamo interrogators were doing the same.

Three or four times, he said, when he was taken to an interrogation room, there were pictures doctored to make it appear that his wife was naked next to Osama bin Laden. "I see my wife everywhere, everywhere," he said.

He said that during one interrogation session, a woman wearing a skirt said to him, "You Muslim people don't like to see woman," he said. Then she reached under her skirt, Mr. Habib said, pulling out what he described as a bloody stick. "She threw the blood in my face," he said.

There have been other reports of sexual humiliation at Guantánamo, one from an F.B.I. agent who reported seeing a female Army sergeant rub lotion on a detainee's arms and grab his genitals, according to government documents released to the American Civil Liberties Union.

At Guantánamo, Mr. Habib was also interrogated by Australian investigators who hoped to learn enough from the Americans to prosecute him, Australian officials said. But, one of them said, "all they had was that he was caught on the bus, and whatever he gave up under 'extreme circumstances' in Egypt."

When the Americans decided last month not to charge Mr. Habib, the Australians sought his release. With Mr. Habib back home, Australian officials have revoked his passport and say they intend to monitor him closely.

A few days ago, Mr. Habib said, he gathered his family and told them everything that had happened since he left Sydney in July 2001. Just in case something bad happens to him, he said, "I want them to know fully everything."