

Hunger Strike at the Guantanamo Concentration Camp

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

The Patriots of Guantanamo

There is a small band of men who are such firm believers in the protections of the Bill of Rights that they are willing to lay down their lives to defend these principles. They aren't soldiers or civil libertarians — they are a group of “enemy combatants” confined in the gulag of Guantanamo.

All freedom-loving Americans should pause to consider the sacrifices of Fawzi al-Odah, Yousef Al Shehri, Abduhl-Rahman Shalabi, Mahid Al Joudi and 21 other detainees who are engaged in a withering hunger strike inside the prison cells of Guantanamo.

When Fawzi al-Odah was arrested in Pakistan in 2002, he was 25-years-old and he weighed a scant 139 pounds. Today al-Odah weighs 112 pounds. He has been on a fast since August 8 and now he is demanding that the feeding tube forced down his nose be removed so he can die and put an end to his suffering.

It is estimated that 540 men are imprisoned in Guantanamo without charges, without trial, without any hope of redress. Hunger strikes have been waged in Guantanamo since early 2002. The latest fast involved 76 prisoners. By late October, 26 detainees were still refusing food and 23 were being force-fed through tubes that, according to attorney Julia Tarver, have left some of her clients “vomiting up substantial amounts of blood.”

Bill Goodman, Legal Director at the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) in New York, says “the Guantanamo hunger strikers are willing to die unless they get humane treatment, including some small measure of justice.... Bloody force-feeding with dirty tubes is barbaric.”

Against all odd, these almost completely powerless prisoners have successfully employed the tactics of nonviolent resistance to win recognition for those basic human rights and civil liberties that all Americans claim as their patrimony.

On October 25, CCR lawyers won access to the detainees' medical records but Tarver remains concerned about her clients, “some of whom are young boys who have spent nearly four years without charge, isolated miles away from their families, and are rapidly losing hope that justice will ever prevail for them.” Tarver reports that her clients continue to be subjected to verbal and physical abuse, medical maltreatment and unsanitary conditions.

The Legal Limbo of an Unnecessary War

The US declared war on Afghanistan ostensibly because the Taliban government refused to turn over Osama bin Laden to the US. Washington unleashed a rain of bombs with the declared goal of toppling the Taliban. In the process, the US arrested hundreds of Afghan and Islamic fighters who took up arms to resist the attacks.

We now know that some of these men were just luckless individuals who were pulled from taxi cabs or marched from their homes to be handed over to US soldiers as “Taliban fighters” — in exchange for tempting bounties of Pentagon cash.

Three British men released in February 2004, complained of being stripped, chained to the floor for 18 hours a day, placed in isolation and threatened with dogs. During their detention, they all confessed to crimes. They were only released after the British government proved that all three had actually been in Britain at the time of their alleged “crimes.”

CCR President Michael Ratner cites the case as proof that coercive interrogation doesn't work: “You get people willing to say anything because they want the torture or the inhumane treatment to end.”

“We're Going to Go to the Dark Side Now”

In the Post-9/11 world, Vice President Dick Cheney memorably told Meet the Press: “We're going to have to go to the dark side now.”

As a result, Ratner notes, the US is “no longer a country of law.... ‘Taking off the gloves’ means literally erasing the Constitution and the protections against torture.”

The outlines of this inhumane treatment are now a matter of public record. Hooded interrogations. Stripping prisoners naked. Removing “comfort items” (like prayer rugs and the Koran). Exploiting phobias (like a fear of dogs). Employing painful “stress positions.”

More than a year ago, the US Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Rasul v. Bush* that the detainees are entitled to legal representation before federal courts. But the White House, the Attorney General's office, and the Pentagon have chosen to ignore the ruling.

That is why the Patriots of Guantanamo have been forced to go on strike with their very lives. They are demanding that their suffering be investigated and the “facts be submitted to a candid world.”

“Give Us Liberty or Give Us Death”

In 1776, America's Founding Fathers signed a document pledging their “lives and sacred honor” to the cause of securing “certain unalienable Rights.” The Patriots of Guantanamo have neither pens nor parchment: They have been compelled to their pledge not with words but deeds.

When Patrick Henry thundered, “Give me liberty or give me death,” his stirring words were rhetorical. Al-Odah's cry is dead serious. He has informed his US lawyers that he wants a judge to order the removal of the feeding tube that is keeping him alive.

Al-Odah's lawyer, Tom Wilner, insists that his client has the right to demand to die to protest his continued imprisonment without charges or any hope of a trial and release. Al-Odah is

willing to die “if it will bring justice.”

The Patriots of Guantanamo are insisting on nothing less than the same basic protections granted to US citizens under the Bill of Rights — specifically, the First, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Eighth and Ninth Amendments. Clearly something is seriously amiss when it is the “enemies of democracy” that are willing to die to defend the Bill of Rights while the men entrusted to defend the Constitution ignore and abuse these very laws.

Today, America’s moral standard is being weighed in the dungeons of Guantanamo. The hunger strikers are not simply fasting for their rights — they are fasting for all of us. Their demands should be our demands. And, if they aren’t, what guarantee do any of us have that their fate might not one day be our own?

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