

Reporters without Borders remains silent about the journalist tortured in Guantánamo

By [Salim Lamrani](#)

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The silence kept by the «freedom-of-the-press» Reporters without border (RSF) organization about Sudanese journalist Sami al Hajj raises many questions on the impartiality of that association headed by Robert Menard. RSF, which is always willing to stigmatize- usually arbitrarily- those countries targeted by Washington such as Cuba, Venezuela and China, has fully ignored the torture suffered by Al Hajj, a journalist with Qatar's Al Jazeera TV chain [3].

On September 22, 2001, Al Jazeera sent a team of reporters, including Al Hajj, to find out about the conflict in Afghanistan. After 18 days of journalistic work, the team went to Pakistan. In December 2001, Al Hajj decided to return to the place with his colleagues to cover the inauguration of the new Afghan government, but before he reached the border, the Pakistani police arrested the Sudanese journalist and released the rest of the Qatari team [4].

Once handed over to Afghanistan-based US authorities, Al Hajj would experience a true nightmare at the Bagram air force base. «those were the worst [days] of my life», he said. Hajj revealed that he faced sexual abuse and rape threats US soldiers; he was fiercely tortured for months and he mistreated in countless occasions. He was forced to kneels down on the floor for hours. Dogs would constantly hound and attack him. The Sudanese journalist was also jailed in a cage located in a hangar facing glacial wind. He explained how his torturers pulled his hair out of his head and his beard, one by one. The guards would regularly beat him and prohibited him to take a bath for one hundred days although his body was covered with lice. [5].

On June 13, 2002, Sami al Hajj was sent to Guantánamo. During the flight, he was chained and gagged with a bag that covered his head. Every time he fell asleep the guards would violently wake him up by beating him on the head. Before facing the first interrogation session, he was held without sleep during more than two days. «For more than three years, most interrogations I faced pursued the objective of having me say that there was a relationship between Al Jazeera and Al Qaeda», Hajj told his lawyer [6].

In the military base located on the US illegally occupied Cuban territory of Guantanamo, the Sudanese journalist received no medical assistance although he had suffered from throat cancer in 1998 and he is currently suffering from rheumatism. They would beat him on the soles of his feet and scare him with threatening dogs. He was the victim of racist humiliations and they never allowed him to take walks due to his skin colour. He witnessed the profanation of the Koran in 2003 and, along the rest of inmates he waged hunger strikes. The US troops reacted violently to the protest: they beat him and threw him down the stairs, which caused serious wounds in his head. Later, he was isolated before being

transferred to Camp V, the worst of all detention centres in Guantanamo, where he was included in the fourth security level, meaning the worst brutal treatment [7].

This testimony, so overwhelming to the Bush administration which still refuses to approve the status of prisoners of war for all Guantanamo detainees, joins other similar accusing declarations revealed by another two victims to Amnesty International [8]. However, they only constitute the visible part of the iceberg. In Guantanamo, crime has two faces: The United States inflicts the most inhumane barbarities on persons held without formal proofs, and forcibly occupies a part of sovereign Cuba.

The conspiracy between RSF and Washington has already been evidenced in the case of Spanish cameraman José Couso, who was murdered by coalition troops. In its report the Parisian organization exonerated the US armed forces from all responsibility despite strong proofs. RSF and the US State Department acted in such a collusion that the relatives of the journalist denounced the report and urged Menard to withdraw from the issue. The conspiracy is also evident in the case of Cuba, where RSF makes US paid agents appear as «independent journalists», although information on this particular issue is fully available and irrefutable [9].

US authorities rejoice about the RSF tendentious reports and even use them in their propaganda war against Cuba. Michael Parmly, Chief of the US Interest Section in Havana, asserted that 20 percent of all journalists imprisoned around the world «are in Cuba. Reporters without Borders recently established the classification of 164 countries as to the freedom of the press; Cuba was declassified in place last but one, before North Korea [10] ».

Since its credibility has turned doubtful due to its constant attacks against Cuba, based on unsubstantial reasons and due to its alignment with the US viewpoint, RSF attempted to respond to accusations. However, the lack of coherence of its communiqué as well as contradictory words observed only enhance suspicions [11]. In effect, Menard has given no explanation about the suspicious links and several meetings of his organization with Florida-based ultra-right Cuban American groups. The RSF general secretary even boasts his admiration for Frank Calzon, president of the Centre for a Free Cuba, an extremist organization financed by the US Congress. «He does fantastic work in favour of Cuban democrats», said Menard [12] Later, RSF had to publically admit that it received financial support from that very centre [13].

Similarly, RSF received fees from the National Endowment for Democracy, an entity dependent on Congress and in charge with promoting US external policy [14]. Such financing implies a conflict of interests in the heart of the French organization, which is not so willing to denounce the actions of one of its sponsors, the US administration. Before the publication of the testimony released by Amnesty International, Menard could have affirmed that he did not know about the existence of Sami al Hajj. But, despite strong international media talk about these new torture cases at the Guantanamo naval base, RSF has not yet deigned to show interest in this case and has deepened itself in revealing silence.

The censorship of this new case of serious violation of the freedom of the press by the Bush administration only confirms again the double discourse of Reporters without Borders. While the organization takes it out on Cuba deliberately, though the cases it raises are far from being convincing, it keeps dead silence about a flagrant attempt against the integrity of a journalist, who has been jailed and tortured just because he works for Qatar's Al Jazeera, a

highly influencing TV chain that does not please Washington that much. The credibility of Menard's organization, already very discredited due its biased behaviours and its links to the US government, is increasingly falling apart since such omissions compared to the obsessive recurrence of certain topics like Cuba can not be the result of mere coincidence.

Salim Lamrani, French researcher at the University of Sorbonne, is specialised in US-Cuba relations.

[1] Amnistie Internationale, «USA: Who Are the Guantanamo Detainees? Case Sheet 16: Sudanese National Sami al Hajj», January 11, 2006. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR512072005> (Website consulted on January 14, 2006).

[2] Amnistie Internationale, «USA: Who Are the Guantanamo Detainees? Case Sheet 16: Sudanese National Sami al Hajj», January 11, 2006. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR512072005> (Website consulted on January 14, 2006).

[3] Amnistie Internationale, «USA: Who Are the Guantanamo Detainees? Case Sheet 16: Sudanese National Sami al Hajj», January 11, 2006. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR512072005> (Website consulted on January 14, 2006).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Amnistie Internationale, «USA: Days of Adverse Hardship in US Detention Camps – Testimony of Guantánamo Detainee Jumah al-Dossari», 16 de diciembre de 2005. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR511072005> (Website consulted January 14, 2006); Amnistie Internationale, «USA: Who Are the Guantánamo Detainees? Case Sheet 15: Yemeni National Abdulsalam al-Hela», January 11, 2006. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR512062005> (Website consulted January 14, 2006).

[9] Familia Couso, «La familia de José Couso pide a Reporteros Sin Fronteras que se retire de la querrela», 17 de enero de 2004. www.josécouso.info (Website consulted on July 18, 2005).

[10] Michael E. Parmly, «Speech by U.S. Interests Section Chief of Mission Michael Parmly Marking the 57th Anniversary of the UN General Assembly's Adoption and Proclamation of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights», United States Interest Section, December 15, 2005. <http://havana.usinterestsection.gov/uploads> (Website consulted December 29, 2005).

[11] Reporters sans frontières, « Pourquoi s'intéresser autant à Cuba? La réponse de Reporters sans frontières aux accusations des défenseurs du gouvernement cubain », July 6, 2005. www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=14350 (Website consulted on July 15, 2005).

[12] Salim Lamrani, Cuba face à l'Empire: Propagande, guerre économique et terrorisme d'Etat (Outremont, Québec: Lanctôt, 2005), pp. 88-89.

[13] Reporters sans frontières, op.cit.

[14] Ibid.

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About the author:

Docteur ès Etudes Ibériques et Latino-américaines de l'Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, Salim Lamrani est Maître de conférences à l'Université de La Réunion, et journaliste, spécialiste des relations entre Cuba et les Etats-Unis. Son nouvel ouvrage s'intitule Fidel Castro, héros des déshérités, Paris, Editions Estrella, 2016. Préface d'Ignacio Ramonet. Contact : lamranisalim@yahoo.fr ; Salim.Lamrani@univ-reunion.fr Page Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/SalimLamraniOfficiel>

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