

Secret CIA Prisons: The murder of Gul Rehman

By [Asim Qureshi](#)

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Asim Qureshi explores the case of a man who disappeared in Pakistan and ended up dead in a secret CIA prison

Walking through a dilapidated mud-hut village in Peshawar, I was being directed by my guide to the home of Mohammed – the brother of Abdul Manan Gul Rehman. Fortunately I had remembered to wear my shalwaar-kamees, as wearing western clothes in the more conservative parts of Peshawar does not engender a great deal of respect. I had travelled around Peshawar before, in 2005 to be exact, and at that time there was little difficulty in moving about and people were very welcoming, no matter your origin or appearance. This time was very different. For the first time I felt frightened of being in Pakistan – even my guide, a former Guantanamo prisoner himself, was worried that we would be stopped at one of hundreds of checkpoints that had been established. I was there to meet with other former Guantanamo prisoners and to investigate the extent of disappearances within this part of the country – and it was for the latter purpose that I found myself making my way towards the family of Gul Rehman.

The room in the house that I was brought into was typical of some of the depravation that exists in this part of the world. Mohammed soon entered the room however and I was immediately reminded of what makes the Pashtun people so special: a majestic appearance coupled with an unassuming countenance and their hospitality of legend.

The family explained that Gul Rehman was an exceptional individual. He was known very well for his kindness and good nature to all, even those who would have disagreements with him. Mohammed explained,

“Abdul Manan[Gul] is younger than me; but we used to consider him like an elder. Whenever there was a dispute in the village, people would turn to him to help resolve the problem. Whenever his name is mentioned amongst the family, people can’t help but cry.”

The family’s history is not unfamiliar in the region: Gul Rehman’s father had been killed by the Soviets during the Afghan-Soviet war. The US government had supported the efforts of themujahideen against the Soviet forces and Gul Rehman found himself joining the forces of Hizb-e-Islami under [Gulbuddin Hikmatyar](#) as they sought to liberate Afghanistan from foreign occupation. Following the Soviet defeat, Gul Rehman returned to a simple life selling wood in order to support his family. In the final year of the government under former mujahideen leader Burhanuddin Rabbani – an avowed opponent of Hikmatyar –, Gul Rehman took up employment as the driver of Dr Ghairat Baheer, the former Afghani ambassador to Pakistan and more significantly, the son-in-law of Hikmatyar.

Gul Rehman remained in the Baheer family's employ as a driver until six months prior to his arrest. In October 2002, he returned to Islamabad to receive treatment at a hospital that specialised in allergies and fatefully stayed at the home of his former employer as a guest. His unfortunate visit coincided with a planned security service raid of Dr. Baheer's home. Dr. Baheer spent the next six years held in US custody – mostly at the notorious Bagram detention facility in Afghanistan. Gul Rehman was not so fortunate.

According to an investigation by the Associated Press, there was a suggestion that Gul Rehman had a nom de guerre, 'Abdul Manan' and that it was the name he used as part of alleged militant activities. However in an interview I conducted with Dr Baheer in 2008, he clarified, amongst other things, that 'Abdul Manan' was part of his full-name,

"It was at midnight that very night that people came to the home and arrested everyone, not just Gul Rehman and myself, but everyone, even the ones serving us tea. Only my wife and children were spared. After one week Gul Rehman and I were separated, we were met by American interrogators on that day and they asked me about Gul Rehman's identity. I explained to them that his full name was Abdul Manan Gul Rehman and that in Afghan culture you often go by two or more names. They said to me that if I was afraid of him I should not worry as I would never see his face again and so I should just tell them the truth. I told them that I was not afraid of him as he was my driver and I had no cause to be afraid. They insisted that his name was not Abdul Manan and that it was Gul Rehman.

"We were detained in a secret place and one day he was taken away in shackles and handcuffs and since then I have not seen him. There has been no correspondence between him and the family and he has not been seen by the ICRC, not in Bagram, not in the Dark Prison, and those released from Guantanamo knew nothing of him. It means that he has completely disappeared. The Americans have not given any indication that he was sick or that he died; there is complete silence from them."

Since October 2002, no one had heard anything of Gul Rehman's detention. Dr Baheer was convinced of his death as no word had reached him or the family of his detention. In Afghanistan most Afghani prisoners were able to get word out but there was no information to confirm the story either way. The family had approached both the Americans and the ICRC in order to find any piece of information that they could but met with no success.

When I met Mohammed in 2008, despite the tears in his eyes, he remained hopeful that one day he would see the brother who was so dearly beloved to all his family. He spoke of a man that completed the family and the deep sense loss they felt without him. Of all the things he mentioned though, the saddest and most telling was the statement of Gul Rehman's daughters,

"If only we had been men! If only we had not be born as women! We would have taken up the cause of finding our father."

Unfortunately for this family, finding their father was never an option. According to the Associated Press investigation revealed on 28 March 2010, Gul Rehman died in US custody on 20 November 2002, over a month after his detention. Their information suggests he was being detained in the Salt Pit (the infamous CIA 'black site in Afghanistan) facility, left half-naked and in the cold where he died after being subjected to sustained period in freezing temperatures. The US authorities have never acknowledged killing him, relating the death to

the family or even returning the body. Rather, the family has been left in limbo all these years, to wonder about when he will return to them.

The murder of Abdul Manan Gul Rehman stands as one of the many cases of the disappeared, which now plagues Pakistan and inflames the already volatile situation there. How many others who were handed over to US custody have been killed in a similar fashion? Cases like [Masood Ahmad Janjua](#) come to mind – a man who disappeared in 2005 into the custody of Pakistani security services and whose wife has been leading the fruitless struggle to uncover such disappearances. Could it be that he too has been killed by the US agencies and the family not informed of such a killing?

Instead of recognising the role that Gul Rehman played in helping to free Afghanistan from Soviet occupation, the Americans chose to subject him to the most inhumane of treatment – a treatment that resulted in his death. Although many will claim that his death was from a different period of the War on Terror, and that now such policies are not in place, the reality is that until this time, Gul Rehman’s death has been hidden. Such wanton disregard for human life will not go unnoticed and eventually will lead to further disaffection until people stop using terror in the name of fighting against it.

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