

USA

Who are the Guantánamo detainees?

CASE SHEET 12

Ethiopian national/UK resident: Benyam
Mohammed al Habashi

21 September 2005
AI Index: AMR 51/152/2005

Full name: Benyam Mohammed al Habashi
Nationality: Ethiopian
Age: 27

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi remains in Guantánamo Bay, held without charge or trial by the US military. Before his arrival he was a victim of the US government's practice of "extraordinary rendition" – he was forcibly transferred from one country to another, in his case three times, without reference to a court. In each country he was tortured or ill-treated. There are also concerns about the role of the UK authorities in his arrest, interrogation, transfers and torture.

"The Americans are getting ready to carry out the torture. They're going to electrocute you, beat you and rape you."

An interrogator to Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi in Morocco

Background

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was born in Ethiopia. In 1994 he sought asylum in the UK and was given leave to remain. He lived in the UK for seven years, during which he converted to Islam and attempted to conquer his addiction to drugs. He left the UK to escape the temptation of drugs and to see Muslim countries "with his own eyes". To this end he travelled to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

On 10 April 2002 Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was arrested at Karachi airport by Pakistani immigration officials. He had been intending to return to the UK. He was not using his own passport.

Torture and ill-treatment in Pakistan

While in custody in Pakistan, Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi alleges that he was:

- hanged by his wrists for days;
- allowed to go to the toilet only twice a day;
- given food only every other day;
- beaten with a leather strap;
- subjected to a mock execution by a guard pressing a loaded gun to his chest.

"I knew I was going to die... I looked into his eyes and saw my own fear reflected there."

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi says that he was interrogated by intelligence agents from both the USA and UK. One US intelligence agent, known as "Chuck" by Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi, told him, "We can't do what we want here, the Pakistanis can't do exactly what we want them to. The Arabs will deal with you."

Torture and ill-treatment in Morocco

"It never, never crossed my mind that I'd end up being hauled half way across the world by the Americans to face torture in a place I'd never been, Morocco."

On around 21 July 2002 Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was taken to Islamabad airport and handed over to US officials. Shackled, wearing earphones and blindfolded, he was flown to Morocco. For the next 18 months he was held incommunicado and, he alleges, subjected to systematic torture at the behest of US authorities. A UK newspaper claims to have flight records of CIA-chartered jets going to and from Morocco on the dates Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi believes he was transferred.

After nearly a month in a prison in Morocco, Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi says that one of his Moroccan interrogators came into his cell with three other guards. "One of [the guards] took my penis in his hand and began to make cuts. He did it once and they stood still for maybe a minute, watching my reaction. I was in agony, crying... They must have done this 20 to 30 times. There was blood all over". Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi states that this torture was repeated once a month for the next 18 months. His torturers would reportedly add to the pain by pouring chemicals onto his wounds.

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi also alleges that he was:

- beaten severely and regularly;
- subjected to sensory deprivation and placed in solitary confinement;
- exposed to loud music for days on end;
- forcibly given mind-altering drugs through an intravenous drip.

Once, when he asked a guard why he was being tortured, the guard replied, "It's just to degrade you, so when you leave here, you'll have the scars and you'll never forget. So you'll always fear doing anything but what the US wants."

"They'd ask me a question. I'd say one thing. They'd say it was a lie. I'd say another. They'd say it was a lie. I could not work out what they wanted."

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi, describing his treatment in Morocco

Torture and ill-treatment in Afghanistan

In late January 2004 Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was told by his captors that he was “going home”. He was not. Instead, after US soldiers had cut off his clothes and photographed the scars of his torture, he was flown to Afghanistan.

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi alleges that he was taken to a detention centre in Kabul called the “Prison of Darkness” or “Dark Prison”, where he was held until May 2004. The detention centre had only 20 rooms as it was reserved for “special people” who the US considered high value detainees. On arrival Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi says soldiers smashed his head against a wall. He also alleges that he was:

- hanged by his wrists, his feet barely touching the floor, for days on end;
- constantly bombarded with loud hip-hop music and “horror sounds” to deprive him of sleep.

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi says that the detainees in the prison were interrogated day and night by CIA officials, for months on end. He alleges that doctors and psychiatrists were involved in his interrogation. He says that he was weighed by doctors every other day, apparently to “make sure” he was losing weight. He alleges that other detainees had “lost their minds” because of the torture and ill-treatment.

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was then taken to Bagram airbase where he alleges he was forced to sign confessions that he had been planning a “dirty bomb” attack on a US city. He states that by the time he was taken to Bagram “I was telling them whatever they wanted to hear”.

“You’re nothing to us. You’re not going to leave here until you testify against people.”

Guard at Guantánamo Bay

Guantánamo Bay

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was taken from Bagram airbase to Guantánamo Bay on 19 September 2004. He says that since then he has been “routinely humiliated and abused and constantly lied to”. In February 2005 he was placed in Camp V, the harsh “super-maximum” style facility where, reports suggest, “uncooperative” detainees are held. He was told that he would be required to testify against other detainees.

In July 2005 Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi and an unknown number of Guantánamo detainees went on hunger strike to protest against the harsh conditions and their lack of access to any judicial review. Detainees say they ended the protest because the US authorities agreed to meet their demands, and that these changes had been personally approved by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Sources from the camp suggest that these promises were not kept.

On 12 August Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi and up to 200 other Guantánamo detainees resumed their hunger strike. In an unclassified statement from Guantánamo Bay, Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi states that the detainees “only ask for justice: treat us, as promised, under the rules of the Geneva Conventions... while we are held, and either try us fairly for a valid criminal charge or set us free”.

Role of UK authorities

“I never thought the British Government would allow me to be slashed with a razor blade for a full year. I never thought they would let me be hauled to the Dark Prison in Kabul for further abuse before my trip to Guantánamo.”

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi

After his arrest in Pakistan, Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi alleges that he was interviewed by UK intelligence agents. He states that the torture stopped while they were there. One UK agent reportedly told him that he knew he would be transferred to an Arab country to face torture.

When he was transferred to Morocco, the Moroccan interrogators told Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi that they were collaborating with the UK intelligence services. He alleges that he was shown photos of individuals that were taken by UK agents and that he was asked questions that he believes could only have been provided by the UK authorities while he was being tortured in Morocco.

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi also alleges that UK officials promised to intervene on his behalf. They have yet to do so.

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi remains detained in Guantánamo Bay without access to judicial review. His hope is that “the British people will hold the British Government to its word” so that he can “go back home” to London.

TAKE ACTION FOR Benyam Mohammed al- Habashi

Write to the US authorities:

- Stating that Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi and all the other Guantánamo detainees must be given fair trials or released;
- Calling on the USA to halt its practice of “extraordinary rendition” to countries where detainees are at risk of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment;
- Calling on the US authorities to keep Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi’s family informed of his legal status and health;
- Calling for a full and impartial investigation into the allegations of torture and ill-treatment of Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi while in US custody, and for all those found responsible to be brought to justice;
- Calling for the US government to set up a commission of inquiry into all aspects of the USA’s “war on terror” detention policies and practices;

- Calling for the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay to be closed, and for all other “war on terror” detention facilities to be opened up to external scrutiny.

Write to the UK authorities:

- Calling on them to make diplomatic representations on behalf of Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi;
- Calling on them to conduct a full, independent and impartial investigation into allegations that UK agents were involved in the interrogation of Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi, and that UK intelligence services provided information and questions to interrogators in Morocco;
- Seeking assurances that the allegations of torture and ill-treatment while in US custody have been raised with the US authorities;
- Seeking assurances that the allegations of torture and ill-treatment while in custody in Morocco have been raised with the Moroccan authorities;
- Seeking assurances that the allegations of torture and ill-treatment while in custody in Pakistan have been raised with the Pakistani authorities;
- Seeking assurances that if returned to the UK, Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi will be released or charged with a recognizably criminal offence and given fair trial.

Write to the Moroccan authorities:

- Calling for an impartial investigation into allegations that Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was illegally transferred to Morocco and tortured there;
- Calling for all those found responsible for the torture and ill-treatment of Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi to be brought to justice;
- Calling for the Moroccan authorities to stop torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Write to the Pakistani authorities:

- Calling for an impartial investigation into allegations that Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was tortured and ill-treated in detention in Pakistan;
- Calling for all those found responsible for the torture and ill-treatment of Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi to be brought to justice;
- Calling for the Moroccan authorities to stop torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment;
- Calling for an impartial investigation into allegations that Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was illegally handed over to US custody by Pakistani officials.

WRITE TO:

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