Guantánamo: Abdulsalam al-Hela (m)

Concern: Rendition and Secret detention

"Contact with him suddenly stopped...when we called him, his mobile phone rang but there was no answer". Abdulsalam al-Hela’s brother, talking of his brother’s “disappearance”

Yemeni national Abdulsalam al-Hela was arrested two days after he arrived in Egypt where he is believed to have travelled on a business trip. He was interrogated in a hotel, in a ‘sealed area’ by people who he describes as civilians. He was let go briefly and then arrested again and taken to another hotel. Though he states that he wasn’t tortured by the Egyptian authorities he states that he was subjected to ‘degrading treatment’.

Seven or eight days after his initial arrest, his Egyptian captors put him on a minibus and drove to an airport. There he saw hooded soldiers who he believed to be American guarding a small private plane, with a maximum of 20 seats. The Egyptians handed Abdulsalam al-Hela to the US officials who then stripped him naked and searched him, dressed him in blue overalls, cuffed his hands and feet and blindfolded him. He was then bundled on to the small plane where he was waistcuffed, hooded and gagged. He was being rendered and "disappeared" by the US government as part of its "war on terror".

It is unclear where he was taken next. Abdulsalam al-Hela’s family told Amnesty International that the Egyptian Embassy in Sana’a, Yemen, told them that he had left Egypt on "a special plane that took him to Baku, Azerbaijan".

What is clear is that he later ended up in Afghanistan, where he was held in secret, illegally and incommunicado, for two years. In Afghanistan, Abdulsalam al-Hela was initially held in a small prison in Kabul which he called the “dark prison” because detainees were kept in pitch darkness 24 hours a day. A statement from Benyam [Binyam] Mohammed al-Habashi, who is also currently held in Guantánamo Bay, suggests that he was held in the same detention facility as Abdulsalam al-Hela. The “dark prison” in Kabul was reportedly reserved for ‘special people’. Benyam al-Habashi estimates that there were up to twenty people in the prison including "the Yemeni businessman from Sana'a" named Abdulsalam.

Abdulsalam al-Hela says that he lost significant amounts of weight in the prison; compared to when he was kidnapped, he was 70 lb (31 kg) lighter. Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi states that in the prison "plenty [of the detainees] lost their minds" due to the constant interrogation and sensory deprivation. He also said that doctors seemed to be examining the patients to "make sure they lost weight".

Abdulsalam al-Hela was then transferred to another prison which he believed was called ‘Malidu’, which was also in or near Kabul. He says that this was an underground, more modern facility where the conditions were better. He was held here for two and a half months. During this time he was interrogated by the US for 15 consecutive days.

He was then taken to another detention facility in Afghanistan, where his jailors told him he was being held at the behest of the US. He was held here for one year and two months. Abdulsalam al-Hela says that he was tortured here, but emphasised that the psychological burden of being confined incommunicado was far worse than the physical abuse. The entire time he was at these prisons he did not see anyone from the Red Cross, let alone a lawyer.

Abdulsalam al-Hela was transferred from Afghanistan to Guantánamo Bay on 17 September 2004. He is still being held there and reportedly suffers from high cholesterol and diabetes. He also suffers from pain in his leg which was apparently broken during his time in US custody in Afghanistan and alleges that he has been denied adequate medical care.

Abdulsalam al-Hela has expressed his frustration and anger at the discrimination and presumption of guilt surrounding the detention regime at Guantánamo Bay. The detainees notice that most European detainees and many Afghan and Pakistani detainees have been released, yet most Arab detainees remain. He also talked of how guards would automatically presume they were ‘evil’ and ‘terrorists’; one guard asked Abdulsalam al-Hela ‘if you are innocent, why are you in Guantánamo?’
Tired of the abuse and injustice in the camp, Abdulsalam al-Hela embarked upon a hunger strike in July of 2005 with up to 200 other detainees. In the later stages of his hunger strike, he alleges that detainees were being painfully force fed through nasal-gastric tubes during fasting hours in Ramadan.

Please write to the authorities:

- Stating that Abdulsalam al-Hela and all the other detainees at Guantánamo Bay must be given fair trials or released
- Calling on the US to halt its practice of “extraordinary rendition” and to halt “disappearances” in the “war on terror”
- Calling on the US authorities to ensure that Abdulsalam al-Hela is afforded appropriate medical care and given adequate contact with his family, and that his family is kept fully informed of his legal status, health and well-being;
- Calling for the US government to set up an independent 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

Please send appeals to:

Charles D Stimson
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Detainee Affairs
2500 Defense Pentagon 5E420, Washington, DC 20301, USA