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The Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula: Families of detainees fall victim to "war on terror"

*"He is alive yet not there, and there is no way to get to him"
Suad al-'Abd al-Jalil, mother of a Guantánamo detainee*

The relentless pursuit of the "war on terror" is having highly damaging consequences on the families of thousands of detainees held in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, the US Naval Base of Guantánamo or elsewhere, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

Forced to endure fear and uncertainty because of the prolonged and indefinite detentions of their relatives, who are held with no safeguards and with a disturbing disregard for international law, the suffering of these families is often exacerbated by the lack of recognition of their plight.

The secrecy surrounding these detentions leaves families in emotional turmoil. The USA and other countries holding detainees in the context of the "war on terror" continue to refuse to disclose sufficient information about them and in some cases the fate and whereabouts of those targeted remain shrouded in secrecy. The majority of these families first hear of their relatives' detention in the media or from friends. Up to this date, Amnesty International has not even been able to get an accurate figure on the number of those arrested, as the authorities holding them refuse to disclose full information.

The report *The Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula: Human rights fall victim to the "war on terror"*, details the suffering endured by those targeted in the context of the "war or terror" and their families. In the words of a human rights activist from the Gulf, the "war on terror" is every despot's dream come true.

"Families of detainees must not also fall victim to the 'war on terror'," said Amnesty International. "At the very least, they are entitled to full information and access to their relatives."

Jamil, the brother of a Guantánamo detainee, told AI, *"Despite the fact that my mother neither reads nor writes, because she is illiterate, when she hears of news reports [about Guantánamo Bay] she follows them with intensity, whether that be on the radio or in the newspapers. It may surprise you to know that whenever a newspaper publishes an item about Guantánamo she runs to one of her children to read it to her, then she grabs the paper and keeps looking at it for so long, as if she is hoping that the newspaper might speak to her."*

Of the nearly 600 detainees held in Guantánamo Bay, almost a third are from the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. The recent pictures showing Iraqi prisoners being abused by US troops increased the concern of their families about their possible torture and inhuman treatment. The failure of the US to allow Amnesty International and other human rights organizations access to Guantánamo and other detention centres fuels these concerns.

"Any allegation of torture and ill-treatment must be immediately investigated and those responsible must be brought to justice," said Amnesty International. "The lack of accountability for torturers encourages such acts to continue."

Amnesty International has been calling on the US, countries in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula and other countries holding detainees in the context of the "war on terror" to bring their detention within the rule of law. Under international law, these detainees must be given immediate access to lawyers, allowed to contact their family and to challenge the legality of their detention. None of these safeguards have been provided by any of the detaining countries.

In April 2004, Amnesty International organized "*Human Rights for All*", a conference in Sana'a, Yemen, which gathered families of detainees, human rights activists and lawyers from the Gulf and Yemen region and abroad. The aim of the conference was to bring those various groups together in order to find ways to end the legal limbo in which detainees held in the context of the "war on terror" are being held. Participants unanimously agreed that the abuse generated by the often sweeping security measures adopted by many governments after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA, which Amnesty International has unreservedly condemned, amounts to a human rights crisis that poses a threat to people everywhere.

Participants issued a *Sana'a Appeal* setting forth a series of recommendations to governments to bring those detentions within the rule of law and international human standards.

"The plight of these detainees and their families must not be allowed to go on indefinitely. They must be charged and given a fair trial or immediately released," said Amnesty International.

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde040022004>

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