

Guantanamo Bay prisoners' wives live lik

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REGI: Three years after the first prisoners in America's war on terror were despatched to the US Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, wives left behind in Pakistan live like widows. The only word from their loved ones is the occasional letter home on US military-issue writing paper, chunks blacked out by a censor's pen.

Among those waiting are two sisters who live in a crowded mud-brick house in the village of Regi near the northwestern city of Peshawar and whose husbands are believed to be in US custody. With a third sister, they share the care of 12 children and an unusual fate: all three women are married to Algerian mujahideen absent from the home.

The Algerians first arrived in the region to join the US-funded "holy war" against Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Like thousands of other Arab fighters, they later settled in Pakistan and forged links with the Taliban.

Shrouded in head-to-toe burqa veils and surrounded by their

barefoot children, the three sisters recounted their experiences — including years spent by two of them in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. They expressed grief and frustration at the apparently indefinite separation from their husbands, and denied the men were associated with Al Qaeda.

"My husband neither attacked America nor killed any American. But Americans have taken my husband," said Mehdiya Ahmed, a 31-year-old mother of five. "My youngest daughter Ayesha was born after the arrest of her father and is now starting to talk. When she sees other kids' fathers she also asks about hers, but how can I explain where her father is?" The family says Mehdiya's husband, Mustafa Ahmed, also known as Abu Abdullah, was arrested in May 2002 at the house in Regi by Pakistani and US Federal Bureau of Investigation agents, along with a male cousin, whom Pakistani officials alleged at the time was an Al Qaeda fighter. Police said Mustafa Ahmed had been in charge of Islamic schools

in eastern Afghanistan during the Taliban years. "I miss my father very much," eight-year-old Khadija Ahmed said as she wept over a four-page letter from her father, Mustafa Ahmed, recently forwarded by the Red Cross from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. "People say that Americans have kept him in a cage." The youngest of the wives, Riyazat Amin, 27, complained bitterly that they had no way to reach their husbands or "fight their cases in any court of law."

Her husband, Adil Amin, also known as Adil Al-Jazeeri, was arrested in Peshawar in July 2003, and she has also received no formal notification of his detention. Pakistani officials alleged he was a ranking member of Al Qaeda.

Amin wrote letters from Bagram, the main US military base and prison in Afghanistan, but the family hasn't heard from him for months and suspect he's been shifted to Guantanamo, too.

US officials at Guantanamo have refused to discuss cases of individual

prisoners so it's uncertain if one or both of the husbands are held at the American base. While — as 8-year-old Khadija noted — the prisoners were initially held in cages open to the elements, the inmates have since been moved to conventional cells.

Riyazat, a mother of four, insisted her husband was innocent. "My husband had no links with Al Qaeda and if he had any links with Al Qaeda then Al Qaeda people would take care of us because we are living very miserable lives," she said.

Pakistan has handed over more than 600 Al Qaeda suspects to the United States since the September 11, 2001, attacks, including Arabs, Central Asians, Afghans, Pakistanis and others — many who fled Afghanistan after the Taliban's fall. Some have since been freed, but many are held without charge as "enemy combatants" at Guantanamo — a classification that human rights groups complain doesn't afford the legal protections of prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions.

e widows in Pakistan

Guantanamo received the first prisoners on Jan. 11, 2002. It's unclear how many of the inmates at the US naval base left families behind in Pakistan. The three sisters in Regi village say they survive on the meager income of their 80-year old father, Sufi Hamid Gul, a prayer leader at the village mosque, and on vegetables grown in the garden inside the family compound. In all, 17 people share their house, which was built as a dowry when the two eldest sisters, Mehdiya and Murshida, got married 15 years ago.

Gul recounted how back then he'd been struck by the piety of the two grooms Mustafa Ahmed — a former university professor in Algeria — and his cousin Abdul Karim. Karim went missing nine years ago, apparently on a trip back to Africa, and Karim's eldest son, Adil Amin, later married the youngest sister, Riyazat. In 1997, after the Taliban took power, Amin and Mustafa Ahmed took their wives and children to live in Afghanistan, and stayed for

four years. The wives said Amin was a trader in Kabul and Ahmed taught in an Islamic school in the eastern city of Jalalabad. They said that days before the US-led invasion in October 2001 to oust the Taliban, they all returned to Pakistan.

The three wives' fate is comparable to that of the many widows of the 25 years of conflict in Afghanistan who live in hardship around Peshawar, struggling to survive without support from husbands who were killed in fighting.

But they have an added burden. Despite sympathy for the Taliban's version of Islam among the predominant Pushtoon tribe in northwestern Pakistan, relatives of foreign terror suspects are often treated as outcasts. "Other kids who were very close and friendly with us now look at us with strange glances after the arrest of my father and uncle," said Fatima, 11, the oldest daughter of Mustafa Ahmed. "They think we are terrorists but we are not" AP