

Human Rights

Guantanamo:

By Clive Stafford Smith

A lawyer for prison detainees is struck by how the immoral mistreatment of inmates has become so mundane

I am writing from the Combined Bachelors' Quarters on the leeward side of Guantanamo Bay. Particularly in the age of "don't ask, don't tell", it is a strange name for a military barracks. Yet the irony of this place runs deep, as does the tragedy. The base motto is "Honour Bound to Defend Freedom", even though my clients, who are prisoners in the detention centre, have none.

I've been here meeting with them this week, but I can't tell you what anyone has told me, as it must all go through the censors. It does not matter that the topic may be as innocuous as Speedo swimwear, for each word is considered a potential threat to national security. (Why would a lawyer talk about Speedos? Because, a few weeks ago, a commander alleged that I smuggled in Speedos and Under Armour underwear to one client, apparently so he could paddle around in the only pool available to him, his privy.) Most of the secrecy in Guantanamo involves suppressing bad news about the base rather than anything

that should really be classified. But I obey the rules or I go to jail, so until I get permission, I can only write about what I see, not what is said.

I had a morning meeting scheduled with Sami Haj, the Al Jazeera journalist, no more a terrorist than my grandmother.

Unfortunately, as has often been the case, the intelligence turned out to be wrong. Yet Sami remained in custody. On the fifth anniversary of his detention without trial, his patience wore thin and he went on a hunger strike, the age-old peaceful protest against injustice.

Sami's strike began 271 days ago. But the Pentagon knows that a prisoner starving himself to death would be abysmal PR, so they force-feed Sami. Rather than leave a feeding tube in place, they insert and remove it twice a day. Have you ever pushed a 43-inch tube up your nostril and down into your throat? Tonight, Sami will suffer that for the 479th time

Sami's original arrest in Pakistan in late 2001 was perhaps understandable because the US military thought he had filmed an interview with Osama bin Laden. To track down the criminal behind 9/11, many people would accept a little trampled due process.

After crossing the bay on the 8 a.m. ferry, an escort drove me down Recreation Road, past the golf course. I noticed a yellow sign. The soldiers were admonished that their value of the week should be "Compassion".

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America's black hole

Medical ethics tell us that you cannot force-feed a mentally competent hunger striker, as he has the right to complain about his mistreatment, even unto death. But the Pentagon knows that a prisoner starving himself to death would be abysmal PR, so they force-feed Sami. As if that were not enough, when Gen Bantz J Craddock headed up the US Southern Command, he announced that soldiers had started making hunger strikes less "convenient". Rather than leave a feeding tube in place, they insert and remove it twice a day. Have you ever pushed a 43-inch tube up your nostril and down into your throat? Tonight, Sami will suffer that for the 479th time.

It is sometimes a minor rule change, imposed from far above, that inflames me. I always carry lozenges, and some months back, a hunger-striking client agreed to take one to soothe his sore throat. By my next visit, the list of "contraband" had expanded to bar this insignificant salve.

Sami looked very thin. His memory is disintegrating, and I worry that he won't survive if he keeps this up. He already wrote a message for his 7-year-old son, Mohammed, in case he dies here.

As I left his cell at Camp Iguana, I pondered why American reporters have

remained so silent about his imprisonment. Here is a fellow journalist locked up for almost six years, with no proof offered of any crime.

In the afternoon, I met with Hisham Sliiti. He's Tunisian, and we get by in French, with a smattering of Italian

Tonight, I must plan tomorrow's visit with Shaker Aamer. Shaker has never met his youngest son, Faris, who was born after his imprisonment and who waits in London, hoping to meet his father. I'd love to ask Shaker about the Speedos I supposedly gave him, but he

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(mainly gesticulating and swearing). It'd been a long time since I sat in a French class, but a translator can cost over \$1,000 a day, and the charity I work with can't shell that out often. Hisham laughs when I tell jokes, but it could well be my accent he finds so amusing.

was floridly psychotic the last time I saw him. He's been on a hunger strike even longer than Sami - almost 300 days - and an interrogator told him I was Jewish to sow discord between us. He is fairly certain that I work with the CIA.

Meanwhile, most of the soldiers are

unwaveringly polite to me - decent people trying to do a terrible job. I sympathise with these Navy recruits who signed up to sail the high seas but live like Bill Murray in "Groundhog Day": A year passes with no change more exciting than a sudden swerve to avoid a lizard. In this legal black hole where a human being has no rights, there is a stiff fine for harming an iguana.

Would that the guards were always so pleasant to the prisoners. In more than 20 years trying death-penalty cases, I have visited all the worst prisons in the Deep South, yet none compares to Camp Six here. To the military, this tribute to Halliburton's profiteering is state-of-the-art; to the human being, it is simply inhumane. The prisoners have an average of 23 hours a day in isolation, six hours of direct sunlight a month, perhaps one fishing magazine a week to read, and never, ever the chance to see a loved one. The immoral has become so mundane. **COURTESY LOS ANGELES TIMES**

The writer is the legal director of Reprieve, a British charity that provides legal representation to prisoners around the world. He is also the author of "Eight O'Clock Ferry to the Windward Side: Seeking Justice in Guantanamo Bay"