

Human rights

I'm home, but still haunted by Guantanamo

By Jumah al Dossari

When will humans start treating each other with respect, whatever our religion or colour?

IT has been a little over a year since I left the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, but I still have trouble sleeping sometimes. On a recent restless night, I found a DVD entitled "United 93" beside the family television set. I had no idea what it was about, but I started watching. When I realised that it was about the hijacked American plane that had crashed in Pennsylvania on Sept. 11, 2001, I began to cry. It reminded me of a very simple question I had asked myself countless times during my 5 1/2 years in Guantanamo: When will humans start treating each other with respect, whatever our religion or colour?

I arrived in Guantanamo in January 2002 after Pakistani forces handed me over to the United States, probably, I suspect, for a bounty. I had been in Afghanistan to assess the progress of a mosque-building project there, funded by people in my native Saudi Arabia. I knew that Afghanistan was a dangerous place, but I was paid for the trip and I needed the money, so I went. It is a decision I will always regret. When the US began bombing Afghanistan in November 2001, I fled to Pakistan. At a border checkpoint, I asked Pakistani guards for help getting to the Saudi embassy. Instead, they put me in a prison, where I was kept for days with shackles on my legs.

After several weeks, I was blindfolded and flown with other detainees to a US military base in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Upon our arrival there, we were thrown to the ground. Someone hit my head and forced his boot into my mouth. Despite the freezing Afghan winter, I spent several weeks in an open tent circled with barbed wire. I still have scars from my time in Kandahar. One is from a cigarette that was extinguished on my wrist and the other from the time I was pushed to a floor covered with broken glass.

One night about two weeks after our



Jumah al Dossari

There were many times in Guantanamo when I felt as though I was falling apart, like a sandcastle being washed out by the tide. I lost all hope and faith. The purpose of Guantanamo is to destroy people, and I was destroyed. I decided that I preferred death to life, and I attempted suicide several times

slammed my head against the table. During others, I was shackled to the floor for hours.

After the beating in Camp X-Ray, a young female guard appeared at my cage, looking to make sure that no other guards were watching. 'I'm sorry for what happened to you', she whispered to me. 'You're a human being just like us'. These words were a temporary balm for my bruises and loneliness

ing that detainees were to be allowed to have court hearings. We never got the promised

stories saying that I recruited people to go to Al Qaeda training camps. But the sheet of paper the military gave me said nothing about recruiting, which is not something I have ever done.

There were many times in Guantanamo when I felt as though I was falling apart, like a sandcastle being washed out by the tide. I lost all hope and faith. The purpose of Guantanamo is to destroy people, and I was destroyed. I decided that I preferred death to life, and I attempted suicide several times.

Once, during a break in a meeting with my attorney, I cut my arm with a razor and tried to hang myself. I do not remember it, but apparently my attorney returned earlier than I had told him to and found me suspended by my neck from the cell wall, unconscious and covered in blood. I broke a vertebra but survived with surgery.

Between suicide attempts, I tried desperately to hold on to the few fleeting moments of light that presented themselves to me. I met every few months with my attorneys and felt better whenever they were in Guantanamo, but my despair would return within a day of their departure. On occasion, I was helped by compassionate guards. After the beating in Camp X-Ray, a young female guard appeared at my cage, looking to make sure that no other guards were watching. "I'm sorry for what happened to you", she whispered to me. "You're a human being just like us". These words were a temporary balm for my bruises and loneliness. Ultimately, though, I believe it was God who did not allow me to die.

In July 2007, a colonel told me that I was going home. He did not explain why I was suddenly no longer too dangerous to live in freedom. Four days later, I was put on a Saudi government plane. When we landed in Riyadh and I saw my family, I was overwhelmed. We all cried and hugged. I said hello to someone I thought was my sister only to hear her say, "Daddy". I looked at her face again and saw that it was my daughter, who had grown from a 7-year-old child to a 13-year-old young woman while I'd been gone.

In Guantanamo, I was very angry with

wrist and the other from the time I was pushed to a floor covered with broken glass.

One night about two weeks after our arrival, some soldiers came and cut off my clothes and put me in an orange suit. They fitted me with very tight goggles so that I could not see and put something over my ears so that I could not hear. I was chained to the floor of a plane for several hours, then again to the floor of another for what seemed like an eternity. When they pulled us off the second plane, we had no idea where we were.

It was Guantanamo.

We were taken to Camp X-Ray, which consists of cages of the sort that would normally hold animals. Imprisoned in these cages, we were forbidden to move and sometimes forbidden to pray. Later, the guards allowed us to pray and even to turn around, but whenever new detainees arrived, we were again prohibited from doing anything but sitting still.

Physical brutality was not uncommon during those first years at Guantanamo. In Camp X-Ray, several soldiers once beat me so badly that I spent three days in intensive care. My face and body were still swollen and covered in bruises when I left the hospital. During one interrogation, my questioner, apparently dissatisfied with my answers,

slammed my head against the table. During others, I was shackled to the floor for hours.

In later years, such physical assaults subsided, but they were replaced by something more painful: I was deprived of human contact. For several months, the military held me in solitary confinement after a suicide attempt. I had no clothes other than a pair of shorts and no bed but a dirty plastic mat. The air conditioner was on 24 hours a day; the cell's cold metal walls made it feel as though I was living inside a freezer. There was no faucet, so I had to use the water in the toilet for drinking and washing.

I was transferred to the maximum-security Camp Five in May 2004. There I lived - if that word can be used - in a cell with cement walls. I was permitted to exercise once or twice a week; otherwise, I was alone in my cell at all times. I had nothing to occupy my mind except the Quran and some censored letters from my family. Interrogators told me that I would live like that for 50 years.

While I was in Camp Five, the military gave me a piece of paper that laid out the allegations against me. I had been in Guantanamo at that point for 2 1/2 years. My lawyer later told me that I had received this paper as a result of a US Supreme Court rul-

ing that detainees were to be allowed to have court hearings. We never got the promised hearings; instead, we went through military hearings at Guantanamo in which we were not shown any evidence or allowed to have lawyers. All we got was the piece of paper.

Some of the allegations were silly. One said that I had gone to Afghanistan for military training in 1989. The truth was that I had told an interrogator about a trip I had made to Afghanistan for a weekend as an overweight 16-year old after the war with the Soviet Union there ended. This trip was sponsored by the Saudi government, which had helped fund the Afghan mujaheddin and was celebrating - with the United States - the defeat of the Soviets.

Only one of the allegations seemed to be directly related to what is called the "War on Terror". It said that I had been "present at Tora Bora". No other details were provided. I had never heard of Tora Bora (although I later learned that it was Osama Bin Laden's suspected hiding place, where US forces battled the Taliban in December 2001). Later, I learned that a Yemeni detainee had told interrogators that I had been there, along with many others, because he hoped to be released if he was seen as co-operating with the US military.

I know that there have been newspaper

had grown from a 7-year-old child to a 13-year-old young woman while I'd been gone.

In Guantanamo, I was very angry with the people who had decided to hold me thousands of miles from home without charging or trying me. I was very angry with the people who kept me in isolation even when I was at my most desperate. I was very angry about having no rights at all. I was not angry with Americans in general and I even drew comfort from some, such as my lawyers and the kind soldier. But I could scarcely comprehend how US policy had allowed me to be treated as I had been.

On the plane ride home, though, I decided that I would have to forgive to go on with my life. I also know that Sept 11 was a great tragedy that caused some people to do dark things that they would not otherwise do. This knowledge helped me forget my miserable existence in Guantanamo and open my heart to life again, including to my recent re-marriage.

When I was watching "United 93", I thought of the soldier who had offered me compassion in Guantanamo. Her words reminded me that we all share common values, and only by holding on to them can we ensure that there is mercy and brotherhood in the world. After more than five years in Guantanamo, I can think of nothing more important. COURTESY THE WASHINGTON POST