

Stories From The Inside

"During the whole time we were at Guantánamo," said Shafiq Rasul, "we were at a high level of fear. When we first got there the level was sky-high. At the beginning we were terrified that we might be killed at any minute. The guards would say to us, 'We could kill you at any time.' They would say, 'The world doesn't know you're here. Nobody knows you're here. All they know is that you're missing, and we could kill you and no one would know.'"

The horror stories from the scandalous interrogation camp that the United States is operating at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, are coming to light with increased frequency. At some point the whole shameful tale of this exercise in extreme human degradation will be told. For the time being we have to piece together what we can from a variety of accounts that have escaped the government's obsessively reinforced barriers of secrecy.

We know that people were kept in cells that in some cases were the equivalent of animal cages, and that some detainees, disoriented and despairing, have been shackled like slaves and left to soil themselves with their own urine and feces. Detainees are frequently kicked, punched, beaten and sexually humiliated. Extremely long periods of psychologically damaging isolation are routine.

This is all being done in the name of fighting terror. But the best evidence seems to show that many of the people rounded up and dumped without formal charges into Guantánamo had

Piecing together the horrors of Guantánamo.

nothing to do with terror. They just happened to be unfortunate enough to get caught in one of Uncle Sam's depressingly indiscriminate sweeps. Which is what happened to Shafiq Rasul, who was released from Guantánamo about a year ago. His story is instructive, and has not been told widely enough.

Mr. Rasul was one of three young men, all friends, from the British town of Tipton who were among thousands of people seized in Afghanistan in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001. They had been there, he said, to distribute food and medical supplies to impoverished Afghans.

The three were interviewed soon after their release by Michael Ratner, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, which has been in the forefront of efforts to secure legal representation for Guantánamo detainees.

Under extreme duress at Guantánamo, including hundreds of hours of interrogation and long periods of isolation, the three men confessed to having been in a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. They also said they were among a number of men who could be seen in a videotape of Osama bin Laden. The tape had been made in August 2000.

For the better part of two years, Mr. Rasul and his friends, Asif Iqbal and Ruhu el Ahmed, had denied involvement in any terror activity whatsoever. But Mr. Rasul said they eventually succumbed to long months of physical and psychological abuse. Mr. Rasul had been held in isolation for several weeks (his second sustained period of isolation) when an interrogator showed him the video of bin Laden. He said she told him: "I've put detainees here in isolation for 12 months and eventually they've broken. You might as well admit it now."

"I could not bear another day of isolation, let alone the prospect of another year," said Mr. Rasul. He confessed.

The three men, all British citizens, were saved by British intelligence officials, who proved that they had been in England when the video was shot, and during the time they were supposed to have been in Al Qaeda training camps. All three were returned to England, where they were released from custody.

Mr. Rasul has said many times that he and his friends were freed only because their alibis were corroborated. But they continue to worry about the many other Guantánamo detainees who may be innocent but have no way of proving it.

The Bush administration has turned Guantánamo into a place that is devoid of due process and the rule of law. It's a place where human beings can be imprisoned for life without being charged or tried, without ever seeing a lawyer, and without having their cases reviewed by a court. Congress and the courts should be uprooting this evil practice, but freedom and justice in the United States are on a post-9/11 downhill slide.

So we are stuck for the time being with the disgrace of Guantánamo, which will forever be a stain on the history of the United States, like the internment of the Japanese in World War II. □