

Saudi prisoner 'slams' then leaves Guantanamo hearing

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'Torture Bay' trial -- mad hatter's tea party!

GUANTANAMO BAY U.S. NAVAL BASE, Cuba, April 9 (Reuters) - In a hearing plagued by translation problems on Wednesday, a Saudi Arabian prisoner first criticized and then boycotted the U.S. war crimes court where he is accused of plotting with al Qaeda to blow up ships in the Middle East.

With the aid of Arabic-English translators, defendant Ahmed Mohammed Ahmed Haza al Darbi understood the proceedings well enough to tell the military judge that he believed the court at a U.S. naval base in a remote corner of Cuba was "a scam."

"I believe there is no international court or local court in the United States that treats detainees or accused people the same way we are treated here," al Darbi said.

History, he added, would record the trials as "a scandal."

The translator quoted al Darbi several times as calling the tribunal "illegal." But the military lawyer assigned to defend him, Army Lt. Col. Bryan Broyles, later said that was a mistranslation and the transcript would be corrected to show he had actually called it "a violation of human rights."

The exchange was difficult to follow because the translators could not keep up and their voices competed with that of the judge, making it difficult to hear either.

The judge, Army Col. James Pohl, recessed the hearing for about an hour while the problems were fixed, then resumed questioning al Darbi about whether he wanted a military or civilian lawyer.

Al Darbi answered nearly every question with a criticism of the court. After being advised that his attendance was voluntary, he asked to leave and was escorted out by guards.

Translation problems have bedeviled the hearings since 2004, when the U.S. military first convened the special court to try foreign captives on terrorism charges at the Guantanamo Bay naval base in Cuba, rather than in the regular U.S. civilian or military courts.

The Bush administration considers the 280 Guantanamo prisoners to be unlawful enemy combatants undeserving of the legal protections granted to soldiers and civilians under international law. Rights groups have severely criticized the detention camp and the tribunals as a travesty of justice.

FITS AND STARTS

Al Darbi is one of three prisoners scheduled for pretrial hearings this week at Guantanamo.

The cases have moved in fits and starts amid myriad legal challenges. The whole system had to be recreated after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the first version as illegal in 2006.

Charges have been brought against 15 prisoners under the revised system, including six who could be executed if convicted on charges of direct involvement in the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States in 2001 that killed nearly 3,000 people.

Fourteen of the 15 cases are still pending.

The only one to be resolved was that of an English-speaking Australian who avoided trial by pleading guilty to providing material support for terrorism. That defendant, David Hicks, finished his nine-month sentence in his homeland.

Al Darbi is charged with conspiracy and providing material support for terrorism, and faces life in prison if convicted. He is accused of training and teaching at an al Qaeda camp in Afghanistan in the late 1990s.

The charges also allege that in 2001 and 2002, al Darbi traveled around the Middle East shopping for boats, global positioning devices and crew members as part of a plot to use explosive-laden vessels to attack a ship off the coast of Yemen or in the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman. The plot was never carried out.

Al Darbi is not accused in the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States but is the brother-in-law of Khalid al Mihdar, one of the hijackers who crashed American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon on that day, killing 187 people.

Asked if al Darbi feared that relationship would affect his treatment at trial, Broyles, the defense attorney, replied: "If he doesn't think that, he'd be crazy." (Editing by Tom Brown and John O'Callaghan)

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