

Another Tortured Year – or Real Change?

– Joan F. Walsh

Kassim Britel, an Italian citizen of Moroccan descent, was kidnapped by the CIA in 2002. Blindfolded, shackled, and tied down in a plane flown by Aero Contractors, the CIA's flight company still based at the Johnston County airport in Smithfield, NC, he was rendered to Morocco for interrogation by torture. For nearly a year, his Italian wife had no idea where he was or what had happened to him. Briefly freed without charge, he tried to return to Italy, but was arrested again and imprisoned for over seven more years. He finally returned home in 2011, damaged in body and spirit.

Also in 2002, in Afghanistan, hundreds of men, and boys as young as 13, were turned over to the U.S. military in exchange for bounties offered to their impoverished neighbors. The vast majority were innocent, but the Bush administration, having allowed Bin Laden collaborators to escape into Pakistan as a matter of political expediency, needed warm bodies labeled "terrorists" in order to appear serious in the wake of 9/11. These hapless men and boys were the majority of those sent to the new U.S. prison at Guantánamo, where many remain. Guantánamo's tenth anniversary, January 11, looms in a few days. Aero Contractors played a role in bringing prisoners to Guantánamo, some from Afghanistan, and others following their torture in various sites around the world. At Guantánamo, particularly in its early days, torture was also commonplace.

The CIA's so-called extraordinary rendition (i.e., kidnapping for torture) program was exposed in a New York Times article in May 2005. Planes based in various locations in the US would pick up CIA snatch teams, which then kidnapped "suspects" at sites worldwide and delivered them to prisons in countries noted for torture, such as Morocco, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, and also to "black sites" run directly by the CIA. Many of these tortured prisoners were later flown to the US prison at Guantánamo. Aero Contractors was found to be a primary provider of these rendition flights; in fact, one Gulfstream jet operated by Aero became known around the world as the "Guantánamo Express."

In November of 2005, in response to press coverage exposing Aero, the NC Stop Torture Now Coalition was formed. In addition to each of the Triangle cities, the group has members in Selma, Asheville, and Greenville, as well as many other locations statewide. It has worked for the past six years to promote investigation of and accountability for Aero's illegal and immoral activities, as well as for some form of restitution to survivors and their families.

Kassim Britel is only one of dozens of survivors of the CIA's extraordinary rendition program. Some of the program's victims did not survive. Many, if not most, of those who have survived either have been released without charge or continue to be held in Guantánamo without charge. In some cases, it has been proven they were victims of mistaken identity; in many others, they were falsely accused. Some may be guilty of conspiracy and/or criminal activity, but cannot be tried fairly because evidence against them was elicited under torture.

Kidnapping, disappearance, indefinite detention, and torture are all illegal by US and international law, regardless of motive. These practices also violate treaties the US has signed, such as the Convention Against Torture. These are the kinds of policies most of us associate with totalitarian regimes and/or military dictatorships. Torture is always wrong.

Torture has also proven ineffective. Under torture, people will say anything they think will make the torment stop; those who have no relevant information will make it up, sending their interrogators on wild-goose chases after more innocent victims. Expert interrogators have better methods, involving rapport with the subject of interrogation. Often, since 9/11, torture has been used not so much to obtain information, but to elicit false confessions and make it appear as if many “bad guys” have been apprehended.

The US has lost standing around the world over its use of these methods. The Obama administration, in its desire to “look forward, not backward,” has in fact perpetuated the problem. We still have indefinite detention at Guantánamo and at Bagram, Afghanistan; the Obama administration announced in August 2009 that extraordinary rendition would continue; and the U.S. still accepts “assurances” (proven false in the past) that detainees will be well treated by countries noted for torture. As he promised in January 2009, Obama must close Guantánamo, and there must be a definitive end to extraordinary rendition and torture. This latter will only come about if there is a thorough investigation into what has happened in the last 10 years, and if those involved, especially those who authorized the programs, are brought to account.

In addition, restitution must be made to those who, like Kassim Britel, have been damaged by horrors beyond our imagination, and may never recover. No longer the man he was before his ordeal, Britel now restlessly walks the corridor of his home in Italy. He and his wife have not been able to rebuild their lives, and she has written an impassioned letter to the Johnston County Commissioners, asking them for some form of recognition of the harm done to her husband by the company operating from the airport over which they have jurisdiction. As yet, there has been no meaningful response.

On this Wednesday, January 11, the 10th anniversary of Guantánamo, a host of organizations including Amnesty International and the National Religious Campaign Against Torture are sponsoring a human chain from the White House to the Capitol to represent the victims of US criminal excess in its “War on Terror”: kidnapping, disappearance, indefinite detention, and above all, torture. Bus transportation to this demonstration is available from Durham and from Raleigh; details are available on the web site of NC Stop Torture Now, which is a co-sponsor of the demonstration: www.ncstoptorturennow.org.

On Thursday of the following week, January 19, NC Stop Torture Now will present signed declarations from Kassim Britel and Mohamed Bashmilah, another survivor of rendition, to representatives of Governor Perdue and Attorney General Cooper, as well as to the district attorney and sheriff of Johnston County. These declarations will be accompanied by a documented report from the Immigration and Human Rights Policy Clinic at UNC School of Law. The report has been endorsed by international officials who are experts on the details and effects of the US's illegal rendition program.

We have all been harmed by our government’s barbaric resort to extra-legal detention and torture. If you would like to come on January 19, and get involved in other activities to foster accountability for torture, go to the site above and also to www.accountabilityfortorturenc.org.

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