

Allen L. Mims, Jr., Chairman
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September 15, 2011

Dear Johnston County Commissioners,

I am writing you from Italy. I am the wife of Abou Elkassim Britel, a victim of an "extraordinary rendition" conducted by the CIA in May 2002. Previous to the rendition flight, my husband was illegally detained and tortured in Pakistan, and interrogated there by U.S. agents. My husband, an Italian-Moroccan citizen, was flown from Islamabad, Pakistan, to Rabat, Morocco, and detained there secretly. I had no news of him for almost one year.

My husband was released without charge in February 2003, but when he tried to return to our home in Italy using his Italian travel document, he was again taken away by Moroccan intelligence. He was held in secret and tortured for another 4 months, during which time I searched for him to no avail. Moroccan authorities denied having him in custody, while the Italians simply did not respond. Only in 2006, as a result of the filing of an Italian investigation, did I obtain the documents proving how the Italian Government has been complicit in this affair.

My husband was put on trial in Morocco in the period immediately following the Casablanca suicide-bombing attacks of 2003. It was a trial with no protections, conducted in haste and fury. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison, despite the fact that he was an Italian citizen and had emigrated to Italy in 1988, leaving his university studies to provide for his family. On appeal, his sentence was reduced to 9 years, and the Moroccan Supreme Court rejected an appeal despite the obvious irregularities. The judges gave no weight to statements about the secret detention to which he had been subjected; they simply ignored them.

From September 2003 to April 14, 2011, when he was suddenly released by a royal pardon, Kassim was incarcerated in Morocco, often in grim conditions. He struggled greatly to maintain self-respect and the dignity of being human and Muslim, and to obtain the minimum necessities of decent food, health care, books and newspapers, and contacts with his family.

Starting in 2003, I made 30 trips to Morocco to support my husband. I have written thousands of emails and letters to many authorities to seek justice. To publicize the case, I created the website "Justice for Kassim" (in English: http://www.giustiziaperkassim.net/?page_id=105) and have worked in order to support myself and Kassim.

Many organizations have concerned themselves with the story of my husband, including: the European Parliament, the United Nations, the ACLU, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Al-Karama [which means Dignity; a human rights NGO based in Geneva], the Moroccan Human Rights Association (AMDH), Ennassir (a prisoners' rights NGO), and Fair Trials International. However, all this has not yet served to bring about justice in his case.

After his release this spring, we returned to our home in Bergamo, Italy, re-entering life here in absolute silence, other than a few newspaper articles. No one has felt obliged to ask us whether we need help. We are exhausted by more than nine years of repeated injustices and deprivations.

For your country that believed in striking out at Muslims as terrorists, forsaking the very principles on which it is based, we don't exist. We have no right to anything, yet at the heart of our story there is an illegal act of the United States. People should not be secretly deported; families should not be left in anguish.

Please know that extraordinary rendition causes severe trauma. I am told that my husband will heal; I hope desperately for this to be true, for him and for me, but the experience of other survivors demonstrates that the damage remains. The evil that we experienced has scarred us deeply. We are tired, and incredulous that human beings can suffer so much while others remain totally indifferent.

Every day I see Kassim suffer. Despite the treatment, he continues to be holding himself back. Every little appointment makes him tired. He often remains in silence for hours, and has difficulty communicating with anyone. He is forced to repress the rage that he feels and that he is frightened of. Often he paces up and down the long hallway in our house and I know that he feels that he is still in prison. He thinks of his ruined reputation and his lost employment, and asks himself what he will do in the days to come, what will we live on? My husband tries to follow a daily schedule, something I greatly admire, because he insists on doing so no matter how sad and difficult some days may be. I don't know how to help him any further, for daily life feels burdensome to me and I believe I am suffering a depression similar to his. We feel alone. Our sustenance is faith.

Even today, despite the obvious innocence of my husband, who is an Italian citizen with a clean record, neither the USA, nor Italy, nor Morocco has considered righting this wrong. We know that nothing can return these stolen years, projects that we could not achieve, life lost. We are changed, disillusioned, and severely tried by so much harm... and the listener is not like the one who suffers.

I am sending you a photo of my husband taken recently. Kassim is trying desperately to find an equilibrium that he will not be able to maintain if justice is not realized, and I am with him.

You have the choice to do something positive. I hope you will want to participate. Better still, permit me to suggest that it is your duty to participate. Aero Contractors, which transported my husband to secret detention and torture on behalf of the CIA, has its headquarters in North Carolina. And Abou Elkassim Britel was not an isolated case: victims like him are innumerable, and many of them are still disappearing.

Thank you for your attention.

Kind regards,

Khadija Anna L. Pighizzini

Bergamo - Italia