

Australia Dossier by Andrew Reed

Australian Released from Guantánamo

Mamdouh Habib was tortured by the United States with complicity of the Australian government.

Australian citizen Mamdouh Habib will soon be released from the notorious Camp Delta in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, after languishing there without charges for over two and a half years. He was being held as an “unlawful enemy combatant,” accused of training with al-Qaeda, and assisting with the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Despite the accusations levelled against Habib by both the U.S. and Australian governments, the Bush Administration announced on Jan. 11 that it will not press any charges, and that Habib will be returned to Australia.

The only “evidence” which the Bush Administration ever had on Habib, was extracted under torture. And by all accounts—his own, those of his family and lawyers, and of the fellow prisoners who knew him—he certainly was tortured.

The surprise announcement of Habib’s release came in the wake of the June 2004 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court that Guantánamo Bay, despite Bush Administration arguments to the contrary, fell within the jurisdiction of the U.S. civil court system, thus entitling detainees to challenge their indefinite detention. Habib’s Sydney lawyer, Stephen Hopper, said that this had forced the Administration’s hand.

“The U.S. government has to put up or shut up,” he said. “When the pressure is put on them, they can’t produce the . . . evidence—because there is no evidence.”

Habib’s ordeal began in October 2001, when he was arrested in Pakistan. In U.S. court documents released

early this year, Habib’s American lawyers report that he was tortured for a week in Islamabad before being transferred to Egypt, where he was detained for six months. The documents describe at length a shocking array of torture techniques.

In one particularly hideous example, Habib was suspended from hooks on a wall, his feet on a drum connected to a battery, which would send a shock through his feet. “The action of Mr. Habib ‘dancing’ on the drum forced it to rotate, and his feet constantly slipped, leaving him suspended by only the hooks on the wall.

“Eventually, Mr. Habib was forced to raise his legs, leaving him to hang by his outstretched arms until he could stand it no longer and, exhausted, dropped his legs back on to the electrified drum. This ingenious cruelty lasted until Mr. Habib finally fainted. . . . Inflamed by his protests and indifferent to his screams, the sessions typically ended only when he admitted whatever they were questioning him about at the time—whatever it was,” the documents added. “In the midst of horrendous torture, Mr. Habib ‘confessed’ to it all.”

Such “confessions” were then used to justify his detention in Guantánamo Bay, where he was transferred in May 2002, and where the mental and physical torture continued. Australian government officials were repeatedly told by Habib and fellow Australian Guantánamo inmate David Hicks, that they were being tortured, yet the government refused to lift a finger. Not surprising, since that same

government tortured *children* for years in its own concentration camps for refugee “boat people” (*EIR*, June 18, 2004).

The U.S. and Australian governments have repeatedly denied any wrongdoing. While the Bush Administration’s complicity in torture and human rights abuses has been well-documented by *EIR*, the Australian government’s attitude is no better. According to Habib, an Australian consular official was present at his initial interrogation in Pakistan by U.S. agents, and was also present when he was aggressively subdued and photographed at a Pakistani airfield. This has been denied by the Australian government, but is only one of several examples that show they knew what was going on.

Although Habib will be returned to Australia without facing any charges, the Australian government has continued to publicly insinuate his guilt. “Mr. Habib remains of interest in a security context because of his former associations and activities,” Attorney-General Philip Ruddock, a member of Amnesty International, said. Habib will not be allowed to leave Australia, and will be placed under surveillance. And Prime Minister John Howard has firmly declared that, “We don’t have any apology to offer. We won’t be offering compensation.”

To date, the Howard government, one of the leaders of the “coalition of the willing” in Iraq, has unquestioningly accepted the Bush Administration’s treatment of Guantánamo Bay prisoners. It has refused to do anything to help Habib or David Hicks, who the U.S. insists will still face a military commission. Howard has dismissed the numerous reports of torture and human rights abuses, simply repeating Bush Administration lies that Guantánamo Bay detainees were being treated humanely.